ANTASTIC
NIVERSE
IENCE FICTION

MARCH
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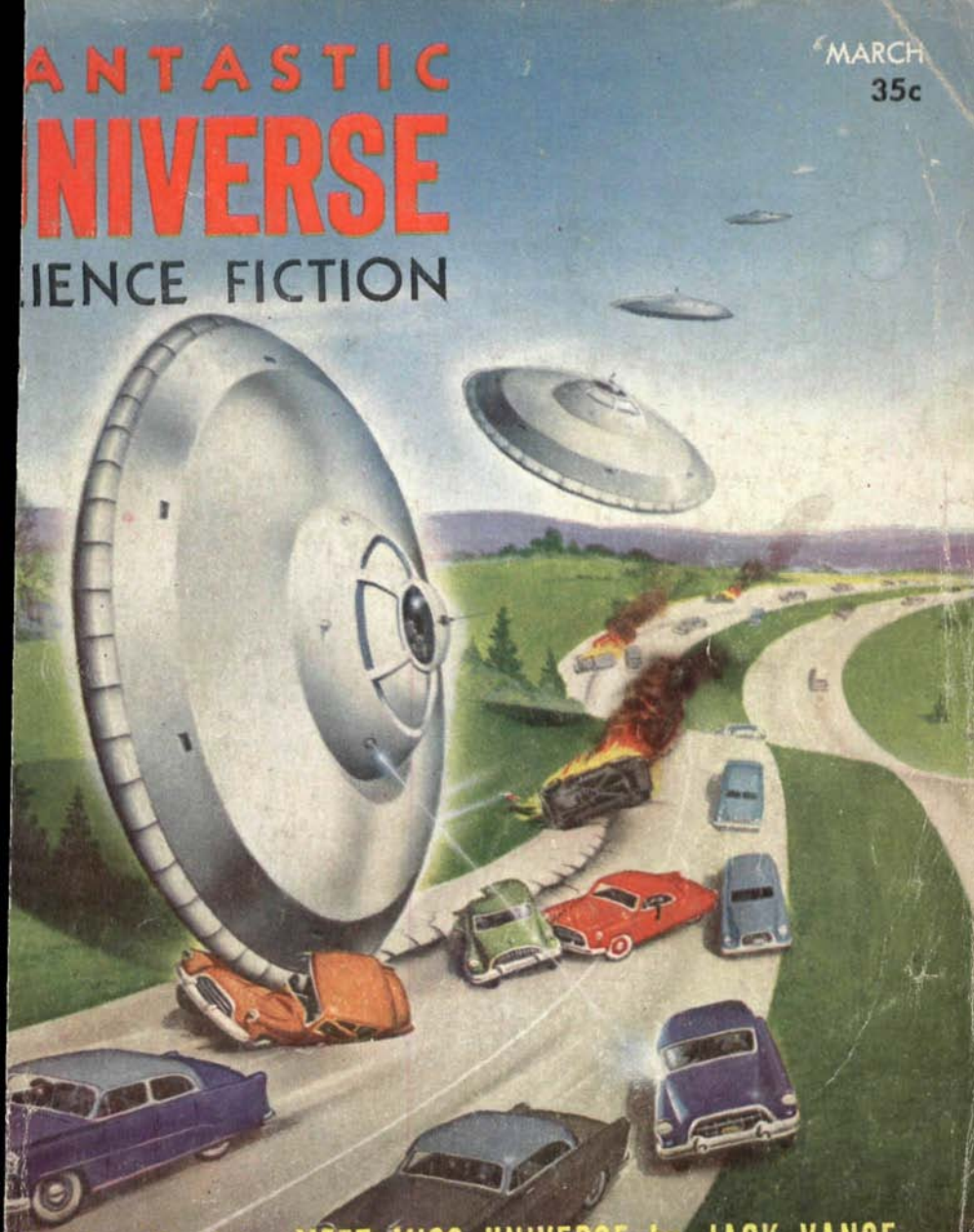

Complete Novelet—MEET MISS UNIVERSE by JACK VANCE

hort stories by JAMES BLISH • EVELYN E. SMITH • LEE PRIESTLEY

RYCE WALTON • IVAN JANVIER • RUSS WINTERBOTHAM and others

LL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

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THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

MOTOR ACCIDENT EXTRAORDINARY — ALL PARTIES ABSOLVED . . . In precisely such banner headlines might some cosmic newspaper lad, completely unperturbed by a catastrophe so remote, announce the first landing en masse of flying saucers on our little green flyspeck of a world. For if you'll study this month's startling and quite out-of-the-ordinary cover illustration intently you'll see, behind its vivid and terrifyingly dramatic surface coloration, one coldly scientific implication that may have escaped your notice at first glance.

There is nothing in this mile-long panorama of destruction and incendiary death which would rule out the possibility of a collision wholly accidental and unanticipated between vehicles so different in origin and purpose that no consciously directed malice could ever arise between them, at any point in eternity.

Even the thin shaft of blinding radiance which is darting from the careening saucer in the foreground does not necessarily imply malice in thought or deed. The shaft is forcing one car to the edge of the road and will in all probability wreck it. But a great, droning beetle about to make a perfect, five-point landing on a swaying hibiscus bloom might well decide to sweep the bloom clean of the creeping plant mites that infest it, purely as an instinctive precaution against bodily inconvenience.

It is really far more chilling to think of it in that way. There's a vicarious thrill involved, just as great a thrill, in fact, as a confirmed mystery story addict would experience on seeing a corpse through a lighted window at midnight resembling in all respects himself. He would know, of course, that such things can't be, and after pinching himself to make sure, would almost certainly go right on shivering in a delicious forgetfulness of self.

Another somewhat spine-congealing analogy leaps unbidden to mind. You'll perhaps recall how Jekyll, when he first becomes Hyde, goes ploughing along a dark street in the small hours, murderously trampling underfoot a helpless child. He was all evil, all primal brutishness, but you somehow feel that his unregenerate malice was directed not so much against the child as against everything gracious and beautiful and tender and fragile in the universe of stars.

And so, if you prefer to think of the flying saucer invaders as wholly malicious and hateful, the stark tragedy presented here could still be accidental on our mundane human plane.

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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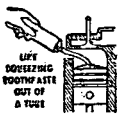

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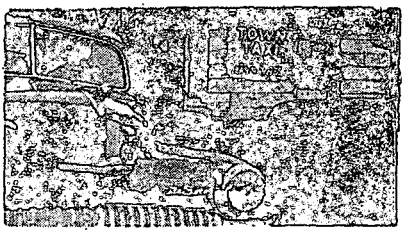

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meet miss universe

by . . . Jack Vance

Miss Universe was quite the most glamorous creature in all the universe of stars. How could Earthmen be so tragically blind?

HARDEMAN CLYDELL turned toward his smart young assistant Tony LeGrand. "Your idea has a certain mad charm," he said. "But —can it add to what we've already got?"

"That's a good question," LeGrand said. He looked down across what they already had: the Califnia Tri-Centennial Exposition, a concrete disk two miles wide, crusted with white towers, rust-red terraces, emerald gardens, sapphire pools, segmented by four great boulevards: North, East, South, West—3.1416 square miles of grandeur and expense in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

A five-thousand-foot pylon, rearing from the Conclave of the Universe, held a tremendous magnesium parasol against the sting of the desert sun. Half-way up the pylon, a platform supported the administrative offices and an observation deck where Hardeman Clydell, the Exposition's General Director, and Tony LeGrand now stood.

"I believe," said LeGrand, frowning at the cigar Clydell had

The Oxford English Dictionary would scarcely hold all of the words that have been written about feminine beauty by Shakespeare alone. Lesser bards have swelled the total hugely. Is feminine beauty only skin-deep? Or can it be more justly compared to a sunset, staining the sky with depths beyond depths of radiance? Science-fiction maestro Jack Vance has an answer that will give you pause, in a frame of reference startlingly, excitingly new.

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given him, "that anything can stand improvement, including the California Tri-Centennial Exposition."

Hardeman Clydell smiled indulgently. "Assuming all these beautiful women exist—"

"I'm sure they do."

"—how do you propose to lure them here across all that space, all those light years?"

LeGrand, glib, insouciant, handsome, considered himself an authority on female psychology. "In the first place, all beautiful women are vain."

"As well as all the rest of them."

LeGrand nodded. "Exactly. So we offer free passage on a deluxe packet and a grand prize for the winner. We won't have any trouble collecting contestants."

Clydell puffed on his cigar. He had enjoyed a good lunch; the construction, furbishing, decoration of the Exposition was proceeding on schedule; he was in the mood for easy conversation.

"It's a clever thought," said Clydell. "But—" He shrugged. "There are considerations past and beyond the mere existence of beautiful women."

"Oh, I agree one hundred per cent."

"Lots of the out-world folk don't like to travel. I believe the word is 'parochial.' And what do we use for prizes? There's a problem!"

LeGrand nodded thoughtfully. "It's got to be something spectacular." He was usually able to shift the ground under Clydell, maneuvering so that Clydell's objections *con* insensibly became arguments *pro*.

" 'Spectacular' isn't enough," said Clydell. "We've also got to be practical. We offer a yacht. A girl from Deserta Delicta wins. She's never seen more than a mud-puddle. What does she do with the yacht?"

"Something we've got to consider."

Clydell went on. "Take a girl on Conexxa. Give her jewels and she'd laugh at you. She's thrown diamonds big as your fist at strange dogs."

"Maybe a Rolls Royce Aeronaut—"

"There again. Veidranus ride butterflies. Picture a Veidranu girl driving an Aeronaut through all those vines and flowers!"

LeGrand took a shallow puff at the cigar. "It's a challenge, Hardeman . . . What kind of prize would you suggest?"

"Something indefinite," said Clydell. "Give 'em whatever they want. Let the winner name it."

"Suppose she named the city of Los Angeles?" LeGrand said with a merry laugh.

"Anything within reason. Set a valuation of a hundred thousand dollars on it."

"By golly, Hardeman, I think you've come up with something!" Tony put down his cigar. "Of course there are problems . . ."

This was a key gambit. Hardeman Clydell's favorite aphorism

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was, "Every problem has its solution." To use the word "problem" was to push one of Clydell's most reliable buttons.

"Hmmf. Nothing which couldn't be solved," said Clydell. "Every problem has its solution."

Tony approached the second phase of his plan; so startling and outré was the entirety that he had not dared to broach the whole thing at once.

"We'd be pretty limited, of course," he said. "There's only half a dozen worlds with humanoid life. Some of those are C's and D's —not really human at all. And we wouldn't want to fool with anything second-rate." He slapped his fist into his palm. "I've got it! Listen to this, Hardeman, it's a killer!"

"I'm listening," said Clydell noncommittally.

"Let's throw the contest wide open! Come one, come all! Every planet sends their most beautiful female!"

Clydell stared blankly. "What do you mean, 'every planet'? Every planet in the Solar System?"

"No!" cried LeGrand enthusiastically. "Every planet that's got an intelligent civilization. Let the whole galaxy in on it!"

Clydell smiled at the whimsy of his aide. "Okay. We get a Millamede and a Johnsonian, a Pentacynth or two, and maybe a Jangrill from Blue-star if we can find one. So horrible that even their own husbands won't look them in the face. And we set them up against, say, Althea Daybro, or Mercedes O'Donnell."

Clydell spat over the railing, made a rasping noise in his throat. "I admit it makes a macabre spectacle—but where does 'beauty contest' come in?"

LeGrand nodded thoughtfully. "It's a problem that's got to be worked out. A problem . . ."

Clydell shook his head. "I'm not sold on this last angle. It lacks dignity."

"You're right," said Tony LeGrand. "We can't let this become a farce. Because it's not just an ordinary beauty-contest—it's more important. An experiment in interworld relations. Now if we got some very distinguished men for judges—yourself for instance—the Secretary General—Mathias Bradisnek—Herve Christom. Also judges from some of the other worlds. The Prime of Ursa Major. The Veidranu Prefect—what's his name? And the Baten Kaitos Grand Marshall . . ."

Clydell puffed his cigar. "Organizing it that way would make the judging impartial . . . But how in the world could I compare some cute little Earth girl with a Sadal Suud Isobrod? Or one of those Pleiades dragon-women? That's the rub of the whole matter."

"It's a stumbling block . . . A big problem. A big problem."

"Well," said Clydell. "Every problem has its solution. That's an axiom."

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Tony said thoughtfully, "Suppose we judged each candidate by her own standards—by the ideals of her own people? That way the contest becomes perfectly fair."

Clydell puffed vigorously on his cigar. "Possible, possible."

"We do some research, get the ideal of every race. A set of specifications. Whoever most closely approaches the ideal specifications is winner. Miss Universe!"

Hardeman Clydell cleared his throat. "All this is very well, Tony. . . . But you're neglecting one very important aspect. Financing."

"It's too bad," said Tony.

"What's too bad?"

"You and I being in the position we are. We're stuck by the ethics of the situation."

Clydell looked at him with a puzzled frown, opened his mouth to speak, but Tony hurried on.

"There's no way we could honorably stage this tremendous spectacle ourselves."

Clydell looked interested. "You think it would make money?"

Tony LeGrand smiled wryly. "How many people have seen as much as a Mars Arenasaur? Let alone a Pentacynth or a Sagittarius Helmet-head? And we'll have the beauty queens of the whole universe gathered here!"

"True," said Clydell. "Very true indeed."

"It'll be the biggest thing in the whole Exposition."

Clydell threw his cigar over the side. "It'll bear thinking about."

Which Tony LeGrand knew to be a form of qualified approval.

II

Hardeman Clydell, for reasons known best to himself, had never married. At this stage in his life he was portly, with a smooth pink face, fine white hair which he wore in dashing sideburns. An extremely wealthy man, he was serving as General Director at a salary of a dollar a year. He was an ardent sportsman; he owned his own space-boat; he enjoyed cooking and serving little dinners of viands imported from distant worlds. His cigars were rolled to order from a special black tobacco grown on the Andaman Islands, smoked over native campfires, cured with arrack, and aged between oak leaves.

He had met Tony LeGrand on the beach at Tannu Tuva, offered him a cigar. When Tony pronounced it the best he had ever smoked, Clydell knew that here was a man whose judgment he could trust absolutely. He hired Tony as his private assistant and trouble-shooter.

Tony had made himself invaluable. Clydell found that some of his most ingenious ideas occurred during talks with Tony . . . The Galactic Beauty Contest for instance. From the germ of an idea—who had voiced it first, himself or Tony?—Clydell had organized a scheme that would make talk for years to come!

With the grand design sketched

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in, Clydell allowed Tony to manage the morass of petty detail. When Tony ran into something he couldn't handle, he came to Clydell for advice. By and large he seemed to be doing a good workman-like job.

After considering the extensive list of worlds known to be inhabited by intelligent or quasi-intelligent races, Tony, with Clydell's counsel, eliminated all but thirty-three. The criteria which they applied were:

1. Is the race socially organized?
(Races living without social structure, in a state of intense competition, or anarchy, might not comprehend the theory of the contest, and so might prove uncooperative, perhaps make trouble if they failed to win.)

2. Can we adequately communicate? Are interpreters available?
(The Merak tribes used clairvoyance to read another individual's internal flagella. The Gongs of Fomalhaut transmitted information through the medium of complex odors, impregnated into wads of hair and spit. The air-swimming Carboids of Cepheus 9621 communicated by a system susceptible to no explanation whatever. None of these races were considered.)

3. Is the race's environment easily duplicable on Earth?
(The weirdly beautiful Pavos d'Oro lived at a temperature of 2,000° K. The complex molecules of the Sabik Betans exploded in pressures less than 30,000 Earth atmospheres. The viability of the Chastainian Grays depended on their fluid-gaseous helium bloodstream, a state which could be maintained only at or near 0° K.)

4. Is there an element of the race which reasonably can be spoken of as female?
(Styles of reproduction among the life forms of the universe admitted of the most extreme variation. The Giant Annelids of Mauvaise collapsed into two hundred segments, each of which might become an adult organism. Among the Grus Gammans not two but five different sexes participated in the procreative act. The humanoid Churo of Gondwana were mono-sexual.)

5. Is the race notoriously short-tempered, vicious or truculent? Are they able to check any habits or instincts which might prove offensive or dangerous to visitors at the Exposition?

When the five criteria had been applied to the life-forms which peopled the worlds of the galaxy, all were eliminated but thirty-three, eight of which were humanoid, classes A to D. (Class A comprised true men and close variants; anything less man-like than Class D was no longer really man-like.)

Hardeman Clydell made a quick check of Tony's research, pointing

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out a flaw here, a miscalculation there; adding a race or two, finding others unsuitable on one score or another. Tony argued over Clydell's decisions.

"These Soterańians — they're beautiful things! I've seen pictures! Great filmy wings!"

"Too ticklish taking care of them," Clydell said. "They breathe flourine . . . Same way with those porcelain insects that live in a vacuum."

Tony shrugged. "Okay. But here—" he pointed to one of Clydell's additions "—Mel. I don't get it. In fact I've never heard of the place."

Clydell nodded placidly. "Interesting race. I read an article about them. Rigidly stratified; the males do the work and the females stay at home and preen. Should make a fine addition."

"What do they look like?"

Clydell clipped the end from one of his cigars. Tony tried to appear busy, but Clydell held out his cigarcase. "Here, Tony, have a smoke. You appreciate 'em; wouldn't waste them on anyone else."

"Thanks, Hardeman. About these Mels—"

"To tell you the truth, I don't remember much about them. They live in monstrous cities, they're said to be hospitable to a fault, extremely friendly all around. Just the sort we want. Good-sized creatures."

"Okay," said Tony. "Mel, it is."

The final list numbered thirty-one races. It was at this point that Tony secured the ideal specifications. He sent coded space-wave messages to Earth representatives on each planet, describing his problem and requesting absolutely exact data on the local concept of female beauty.

When the information had been returned and filed, Tony prepared invitations, which were signed by Hardeman Clydell, and dispatched to each of the planets. The value of the prize had been hiked to a million dollars, both to entice contestants and to make more of a splash in the news organs of the world.

Twenty-three of the thirty-one worlds agreed to send representatives.

"Think of it!" marvelled Hardeman Clydell. "Twenty-three worlds confident enough in the beauty of their women to pit them against the class of the galaxy!"

And Tony LeGrand started grinding out publicity.

"The most beautiful creatures in the universe! Meet Miss Universe, at the California Tri-Centennial Exposition!"

III

The California Tri-Centennial Exposition opened at eight o'clock on the morning of Admission Day. During the first twenty-four hours well over a million men, women and children entered the grounds through turnstiles at the heads of the four great boulevards, or up

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from the underground tube terminals. Second day attendance was almost 900,000; the count on the third day was 800,000. After the first week, attendance levelled off at a steady half-million a day.

The Trans-Galactic Beauty Contest was scheduled for the month of February, when attendance might be expected to undergo a seasonal lull.

Twenty-three glass-walled cases, fifty-five feet long, thirty feet deep, twenty feet high, were being constructed under joint supervision of the Astro-physical Society of America and the World Bureau for Biological Research. Each case carefully duplicated home conditions of pressure, temperature, gravity, radiation and chemistry for one of the contestants.

In most cases the adjustments were minor: the addition of a few per cent of sulphur dioxide to the atmosphere; the elimination of water vapor; regulation of the temperature.

The interior of each vivarium simulated a landscape on the contestant's home planet. Case #21 was a lake of quicksilver, broken by carborundum crags. The floor of Case #6 was crusted over with brown algae. A curtain of liverish Spiratophore hung at the back; a long igloo of dried moss humped up at the right.

Case #17 was upholstered with a brown shaggy fiber, like enormously magnified sponge. Hanging on hooks were massive toilet implements. This was the vivarium in which Miss Mel would display herself to the eyes of curious Earth people.

Case #20 was a jungle of the red, yellow, blue and green vegetation of Veidranu. Case #15 depicted the Martian desert, with the crystal curve of a dome-wall at the back. Case #9 simulated a street in Montparnasse: plane trees, a sidewalk cafe, kiosks plastered with posters. This last was Exposition headquarters for Miss Earth, Sancha Garay of Paris.

During the middle of January contestants began to arrive at Los Angeles space-port. Hardeman Clydell, a judge, decided to see none of the off-world beauties before the actual contest, and Tony LeGrand delivered official greetings in his name.

Back at the Exposition office, he reported to Clydell.

"There's one or two cute ones among the humanoids. The others may be beautiful in a technical sense—but not for me."

Clydell looked curiously at a bruise on Tony's face. "Did you get in a fight?"

"That's your friendly Miss Mel. She reached out to pat my cheek."

"Oh," said Clydell. "She's the big one, isn't she?"

"Big and rough. Miss Mel. Or better Miss Smell. Part elephant, part dragon, part gorilla, part lion. And affectionate? Already she's invited me home for a visit. I can stay as long as I want."

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"No trifling with the ladies' affections," Clydell warned with a waggish shake of the finger, and a mocking smile.

"I wouldn't mind trifling with Miss Veidranu or Miss Alschain . . ." He handed Clydell a packet of blue-bound pamphlets.

"What am I supposed to do with these?" asked Clydell.

"Read them. It's information you'll need for the judging: a briefing on the background of each of the contestants, a description of her home planet, and most important, the standards on which she is to be judged."

"Well, well," said Clydell. "Let's see what we have here." He reached in his humidor for a cigar, pushed it across to Tony.

"Not now, Chief. I've just had lunch."

"That's when they're best!"

Tony slowly selected a cigar.

"Now," said Clydell, "to business." He glanced at a paper clipped to the cover of the first pamphlet.

"That's a master-list," said Tony. "We'll print 'em up in the bulk and give them away to the audience."

Clydell studied the sheet.

"THE FIRST TRANS-GALACTIC BEAUTY CONTEST!
QUEST FOR MISS UNIVERSE!
PRIZE FOR WINNER:
HER HEART'S DESIRE.

Judging begins February 1st. Each contestant will be rated by the standards of beauty of her own world.

JUDGES:

1. Mr. Skde Shproske, Ambassador from Gamma Grus.
2. Mr. 92-14-63-55, Commercial Factor from Aspidiske (Iota Argus).
3. Mr. A-O-INH, Student from Persigian (Leo 4A563).
4. Mr. SSEET-TREET, Commercial Factor from Kaus Australis (Eta Sagittarii).
5. The Honorable Hardeman Clydell of Earth.

THE CONTESTANTS:

1. Miss Conexxa—"

Tony LeGrand interrupted Hardeman Clydell's reading. "You will notice that I've made an informal note or two after each of the contestants. They're for your own information only—they won't be included on the public program."

Clydell nodded, took a luxuriant puff of his cigar, read on down the list.

1. Miss Conexxa (Beta Trianguli). Humanoid, Type A. Tall, rangy. Red hair in varnished spikes, copper skin, black lips and ears. Shins overgrown with glossy black fur, like cowboys chaps. Attractive in a weird kind of way. Weight 150 lbs.

2. Miss Alschain (Beta Aquilae) Humanoid, Type B. Little, like a

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big-eyed elf. Eyebrows like tufts of green feathers. Thin pale hair like corn-silk. Insectivorous. Weight 80 lbs.

3. Miss Chromosphoro (Centauri 9518). Upper half like a big red fish, surrounded by eighteen jointed legs, the knees at eye-level. Weight 150 lbs.

4. Miss Shaula (Lambda Scorpii). Inverted tub. Mottled brown and gray. Shiny. A hundred little sucker-legs underneath. Eye in center like a periscope. Weight 200 lbs.

5. Miss TIX (Tau Draconis). Humanoid D. Jackstraw type. 9 feet tall, spindly. Big head, no chin. Faceted eyes. Cockroach-color. Suckers at tips of fingers (16 fingers). Weight 90 lbs.

6. Miss Aries 44R951. A big dry tumbleweed, with a hundred jellyfish tangled in it. Weight 40 lbs.

7. Miss Vindemiatrix (Eta Virginis). Translucent eel with dorsal spines and four hands around mouth. Brain in long spinal band, phosphoresces visibily during thought processes. Weight 60 lbs. 3 ounces.

8. Miss Achernar (Alpha Eridani) Armadillo with wasp head. Green scales. Highly telepathic. Be careful what you think around this one. Weight 150 lbs.

9. Miss Earth. Sancha Garay of Paris. Need I describe her? Humanoid A. Weight 115 lbs.

10. Miss Theta Piscium. 40 starfish strung on a seven-foot length of bamboo. She rolls, walks upright, or jumps. Weight 30 lbs.

11. Miss Arneb (Alpha Leporis). A globe of blue jelly. Inside are seven balls of yellow light floating around 3 balls of red light. Weight: ?

12. Miss Jheripur (Omega Crucis). Humanoid C. Four feet high, three feet wide, yellow as butter. No hair. Weight 250 lbs. Quite an armful.

13. Miss Delta Corvi. The name fits. She looks like a crow. Tall, no beak, black skin, no feathers except crest running down neck. Weight 200 lbs.

14. Miss Alphard (Alpha Draconis). Like a metal lobster, without claws, antennae. Low to the ground. Said to be fast on feet; also rather touchy. Don't joke with this one. Weight: ? Maybe 500 lbs. Maybe more.

15. Miss Mars. Lorraine Jorgensen, of Polar Colony. Blonde, big blue eyes. Very nice. Weight 124 lbs.

16. Miss Claverops. Humanoid C. Amphibious, sleek like a seal. Greenish-brown. Hands and feet like a frog. Weight 180 lbs.

17. Miss Mel. A monster. Eighteen feet long, color of raw oysters. Six big arms. Makes constant noise like a loud laugh. Head something like a gorilla, thorax like queen termite. Weight—I don't dare guess. Be careful of this one. She likes to pet you. I'm black and blue from her love-taps. Smells like slaughter-house. There's something

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she seems to want, but I can't make out what it is.

18. Miss Sadal Suud (Beta Aquarii). Mandrake. Body like green-white carrot. Red foliage sprouting from head. Sadal Suud means Luckiest of the Lucky. Will she win? Weight 150 lbs.

19. Miss Persigian (Auriga 225-G). Bright blue lizard. Pretty color. Said to sting like a nettle on contact. Weight 100 lbs.

20. Miss Veidranu (Psi Hercules). Humanoid B. Fragile thing. Covered with moth-dust. Pink, green, blue film for hair, running down her back. Nice figure. Pretty. Weight 100 lbs.

21. Miss Gomeisa (Beta Canis Minor). A ten foot pontoon with an iron sail. Lives in an ocean of mercury. Charged electrically. Care! Don't touch! Weight: ? Heavy.

22. Miss Procyon (Alpha Canis Minor). Forty feet of Manila hawser.

23. Miss Grglash (Eta Cassiopeiae). Humanoid D. Woman-like form misleading. Basic chemistry siliconic. Skull is a furnace, flames shoot out of holes in scalp. Looks like beautiful orange hair. She's hot. Don't touch! Weight 180 lbs.

Hardeman Clydell laid down the paper. "Good job. Thumb-nail sketch of each contestant." He picked out one of the blue-bound pamphlets at random. "Miss Aries 44B951." He looked back at the master-list. "'A big tumbledweed with a hundred jellyfish tangled in it.' Let's see . . . 'She lives on the surface of shallow lakes crusted over with algae. Males construct igloos of peat-moss on shore.' Mmmm . . . 'Perform complicated dances on sacred lakes . . .' Mm hm . . . Mm hm . . . Here's what I'm looking for. The specifications."

"You'll find 'em definite," said Tony. "To the hundredth of an inch."

"They look rather technical," said Clydell. "'Diameter measured from agrix to therulta—'" He looked up at Tony. "What in heaven's name is an agrix? And a therulta? Should I know?"

"They're explained in the appendix. There's a diagram of the creature's physiology. The agrix and therulta, as I recall, are terminal kinks of one of the veruli. A veruli, naturally, is a fiber."

"I see, I see," muttered Clydell. "Well, well. 'Diameter measured from agrix to therulta: 42.571 centimeters. From clavon to gadel—' I suppose these terms are also explained?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely."

Clydell puffed his cigar. "'38.-092 centimeters. Ganglionic orgotes—'"

"They're the jellyfish things."

"'—should number 43.' What are all these figures!" He pointed.

Tony came around the desk, looked down at the pamphlet. "Oh, those. They're the indexes of hardness, viscosity, temperature and color of the orgotes—which, by the

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way, should give off no perceptible odor."

"Am I expected to smell these orgotes—all forty-three of them?"

"I suppose so—to do a fair job."

Hardeman Clydell's face became stubborn and sulky. "I don't mind examining thighs and measuring bosoms—but this fooling with agrices and smelling of orgotes—I just don't have the time." Thoughtfully he contemplated Tony LeGrand, who quickly leaned forward, found another pamphlet.

"Now this Miss Veidranu. I've seen her. She's cute as a bug's ear. Golly, some of the things you've got to measure on her!"

But Hardeman Clydell was not to be diverted. "Tony, I trust your judgment as I do my own."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that!"

"Yes," said Clydell firmly. "We will let my name stand on the list of judges—but you'll do the judging."

"But, Hardeman—I don't think I'm up to it!"

"Of course you are," said Clydell bluffly. "You're acquainted with these creatures. You've studied them."

"Yes, but—"

"You make your measurements, come to a fair verdict. I'll look it over and then at the right time, I'll be the figure-head."

Tony grimaced. "It's mainly that Miss Mel. If only she'd keep her big hands off me. Frankly, Chief—" He looked at his cigar, gently tapped the ash in a pottery dish, looked up; Clydell was gazing at him with a mildly questioning glance.

"Very well," muttered Tony. "I suppose this is the kind of thing I'm being paid for."

Hardeman Clydell nodded. "Exactly."

IV

Tony paid a visit to Hotel Mira Vista, in Los Angeles, where Miss Zzpii Koyae, from the fourteenth of Alschain's planetary throng, occupied a suite. Miss Koyae was lovely by the standards of anybody's world. Hardly five feet tall, she was light as a puff of smoke, charming and saucy as a kitten in tall grass. Her skin was pastel green, the tuft of hair over her delicate face was pale as moonlight. She wore scarlet slippers, a smock of blue gauze, and a green chrysanthemum-like bangle in her ear.

She looked like a fairy from one of the ancient fables: not quite human. She greeted Tony with a burst of eager chatter, and when she learned that Tony was to judge the contest she became even more vivacious. She knew a few words of English, and taking both Tony's hands in hers, she expressed her pleasure at his visit.

"And after the contest—then you must come see me! On Plais, by the star you call Alschain. Ah, it is a lovely planet! You will be my guest, you will live with me in my little house by River Chthis. Of course I will win, and I will buy

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a million yards of rich black silk, and then you will find what gratitude means to one of my race!"

Tony laughed. "You're sweet, you little rascal!" He put his arm around her shoulders, which pulsed like the breast of a bird. He kissed the tip of her nose, and would have proceeded further, but she held him off. "No, no, my Tony! After the contest!"

* * *

Miss Sancha Garay had taken an apartment at the Desert Inn on the slopes of Mount Whitney. The call-button sounded, and a maid answered the summons. She recognized the face in the reception plate, and spoke to Miss Garay over the intercom. "It's that young man from the Exposition. The one that wanted all the information."

"Peste!" said Sancha. "How tiresome. Must I see him?" She gave the pillow by her feet a petulant kick. "Very well. Allow him in the room for two minutes. No more. Be firm. Take no excuse."

Tony came into the room. "Hello, Miss Garay." He looked around. "Completely comfortable, I hope?"

"Yes. Very." Sancha scowled out across Death Valley, jumped up to her knees, turned her back on Tony, put her chin on her hands.

"It's a nuisance," said Tony. "As if I don't have enough work, now I'm one of the judges at the beauty contest."

With one movement Sancha Garay had whirled, jumped to her feet, and was facing him, her lovely face radiant. "Toneee! How wonderful! And to think that we're such friends!"

"It is nice, isn't it?" said Tony.

"Mmm," said Sancha, "you're so sweet, Tony, coming to see me like this—So sweet. Give me a little kiss—"

The maid entered the room. "I'm sorry, Miss Garay. The dress-fitter is here. She won't wait. You have got to come at once."

"Rats," said Tony. "Very well. I guess I better go."

"Grand diable du sacre feu!" said Sancha Garay under her breath.

* * *

"You're so strong," said Miss Fradesut Consici, of Veidranu, in her husky-sweet voice. "On my planet the men are effete. After the contest I will stay on Earth, where men are strong! The money I win —perhaps you help me spend it? Eh, Tony?"

"I'd sure like to help," said Tony. "Ah, but you're so soft, fragile . . ." He put his hands on her arm, stroked the skin which glowed with subtle moth-wing colors, began to draw her toward him. She fluttered like one of the butterflies she was accustomed to ride through the Veidranu swamps.

"No, no! Love is not for now! You would not wish the gloss to leave my skin? I must be beautiful! Afterwards—then you will see!"

"Afterwards," grumbled Tony. "Always afterwards!"

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"Tony!" sighed the Veidranu girl, "you frown, you sulk. It is not because of me?"

Tony sighed. "No. Not altogether. I've got to go see that blasted Mel monster, arrange to have her brought down to the Exposition. She's so big I'll need two air-freighters instead of one . . ."

* * *

He paused outside of the vivarium in which Miss Magdalipe, of Mel, made her residence, and the interpreter, an officious little Breiduscan, humanoid, thin as a willow whistle, with a voice like a cricket, spied him.

"Ah, Mr. LeGrand, at last you have come. Miss Magdalipe is anxious; she is waiting to see you."

"Just a minute," growled Tony. At last he had found a use for Hardeman Clydell's cigars: the smoke tended to over-power the Mel atmosphere.

The cigar was alight. Tony coughed, spit. "Okay," he said grimly. "I'm ready."

The interpreter preceded him into the vivarium. Magdalipe was crouching with her great thorax toward the door. At the first shrill sounds of the interpreter's speech, she lurched around, and seeing Tony, roared in pleasure. She patted him, squeezed. Tony's ribs creaked; his feet left the ground. The great maw bellowed a foot from his ear.

Behind Tony the interpreter translated. "Miss Madgalipe is glad to see you. She likes you. She says if she wins the contest, she will invite you to her palace on Mel. She says she is very fond of you; you will enjoy yourself."

"Not bloody likely," thought Tony. He puffed vigorously on his cigar, blew smoke in her face. If one of Clydell's special cigars failed to daunt her, nothing could. She gurgled in pleasure, reached out to pat him again, but missing his back, cuffed the side of his face. And Tony's head rang like a bell.

V

On the night of January 31, twenty-three air-freighters grappled twenty-three enormous glass cases in various parts of California, lifted them high, conveyed them across the Mojave Desert to the glinting metal mushroom crouching on the pale sand. On the morning of February 1, visitors to the Tri-Centennial Exposition found the Conclave of the Universe ringed by twenty-three show-cases displaying the beauty of the universe.

On February 1, paid admission to the Exposition exceeded a million and a half.

Judging commenced at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Each judge was required to inspect each of the contestants separately, measure her every dimension, analyze her color, determine her viscosity, elasticity, density, area, temperature, refractive index, conductivity; then he must compare all these results with the previously ascertained racial ideal.

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It was slow work. But there was no hurry. Each day the turnstiles clicked a million times or more. By February 14 all expenses incident to the beauty contest had been liquidated; it was pure gravy until February 28.

The public as a whole saw no reason to delay the final decision. The consensus made Sancha Garay winner, Lorraine Jorgensen of Mars runner-up, followed closely by Miss Zzpii Koyae of Alschain, Miss Fradesut Consici of Veidranu and Miss Arednillia of Beta Trianguli, the Type A humanoid with the spiky red hair and the black fur on her legs.

One of the more sensational news organs pulled a switch and conducted an Ugliness Contest, announcing its results February 15.

"We have conducted this Ugliness Contest on a basis as fair as the five judges are conducting their Beauty Contest.

"Our standards are those of physical reaction. We have asked ourselves, which of these twenty-three lovelies nauseate us most completely?

"On these bases, Miss Earth, Miss Mars, Miss Veidranu, Miss Beta Trianguli and Miss Alschain fail miserably. None of them nauseate us. Otherwise it's a close race.

"We make the following judgments:

Most frightening and hideous face. #17, #8.

Most disgusting color. #17, #5.

Most violent odor. #17.

Most unbelievable. #21, #23, #5.

Least desired opponent in catch-as-catch-can match. #17.

Least dainty. #17.

Consensus, and winner. #17, Miss Magdalipe of Mel."

The public agreed. It was the conclusion to which roughly twenty million of them had already arrived.

So, on February 28, it came as a tremendous surprise when the judges unanimously named Contestant #17, Miss Magdalipe of Mel, winner of the contest, and crowned her Miss Universe, Queen of Interstellar Beauty.

The joint statement, subsequently published in the press, sounded a defensive note.

"There is no possibility of doubt or question. The decision of the judges has been based on most careful measurements and is final. By the rules of the contest and by unanimous agreement of the judges, Miss Magdalipe of Mel, having most closely approximated the ideal standards of her world, is hereby declared Miss Universe, Queen of Interstellar Beauty.

"Tomorrow, March 1, at four o'clock, Miss Universe will name her Heart's Desire, and if it lies within the power of the officials of the California Tri-Centennial Exposition, her desire will be satisfied."

VI

Tony LeGrand called on Miss Sancha Garay. "Look, kid," he said,

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"you don't know how I worked for you. Gave you every possible break . . ."

She sidled up to him with the prancing gait of a colt. "You filthy name of a blue dog!" She hissed, "Go and never return! I spit at you!"

Miss Zzpii Koyae of Alschain was less vehement. "In my country there is no fighting, no enemies. Everyone is friendly . . . And why? Because when we have enemies we do—*this!*" And she slapped a ribbon across his cheek. It vibrated with small black dots, which jumped to Tony's skin and scurried down inside his clothes. Presently they began to bite.

A doctor managed to remove most of the virulent creatures from Tony's flesh, and prescribed a soothing ointment. Tony made no attempt to contact either Miss Veidranu or Miss Beta Trianguli, both of whose races on occasion practiced human sacrifice.

It was nearly time for the Grand Award, the presenting of Heart's Desire. Tony returned to the Exposition, rode the elevator up to the administration office.

Clydell greeted him cordially. "Well, Tony, everything went off beautifully. Good work all around . . . Better arrange to have those vivaria freighted out of here tonight. All except Miss Universe, I suppose . . . Miss Universe." Clydell wrinkled up his pink face. "There couldn't possibly have been a slip-up."

"No . . . She just melted into those specifications."

"All I can say is the men on her planet don't show any kind of taste . . . Well, it's quarter to four. Let's go down, find what she wants. We'll get it for her, ship her home."

Descending to the Conclave of the Universe, they mounted the presentation platform which had been erected in front of Case #17.

It was festooned with flowers, metal ribbons, and gala insignia. Places were ready for each of the five judges, none of whom were yet on the scene.

Reporters and TV photographers were busy with Miss Universe. They were inclined to be facetious, joking and laughing among themselves, hinting of improper relations between Miss Magdalipe and her pipe-stem interpreter.

"Tell us, Miss Universe, how does it feel to be the most beautiful female in the universe?"

"Just like always," she bellowed. "No different."

"You get lots of attention on Mel? Lots of boy friends?"

"Oh, yes. Very many."

"The men must be pretty rugged, eh?"

"No. Weaklings, pipsqueaks. They do the work."

"Were you surprised when you won?"

"No surprise."

"You expected to win?"

"Of course. There is no way I could lose."

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"Exactly why is that?" he asked.

Both Miss Universe and the interpreter seemed surprised by the question; they conversed back and forth—contrabass and piccolo. Finally Miss Madgalipe made a statement and the pipe-stem Breiduscan translated.

"The letter comes in from Earth asking measurements of most beautiful woman. They measure me. I permit nothing else. I am most beautiful woman. In fact I am only woman. I lay eggs for whole planet."

There was great excitement, amusement. The reporters spotted Clydell and Tony, and demanded a statement. "Has Miss Mel won the contest fairly? Any chance of disqualification?"

Hardeman. Clydell flushed angrily, looked at Tony. "What's the truth of all this, Tony?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief," said Tony, "Miss Universe has fulfilled all the conditions of winning the contest. The fact that she is the only woman on the planet constitutes a mere technicality."

Clydell recovered his poise. "That is my position exactly. Now, if you gentlemen will be so good, we are about to find out what that lady wants for her prize. Her Heart's Desire."

The reporters made way. Clydell and Tony approached the vivarium.

Clydell tipped his hat to Miss Universe, who, on the other side of the glass, thumped her tremendous thorax upon the floor.

Clydell looked around the presentation platform. "Where are the other judges?"

A messenger girl in blue slacks approached, whispered to Clydell. He cleared his throat, addressed the reporters and the TV cameras. "The other judges have given us as much of their time as they were able; and in the name of the Exposition I want to make known my gratitude to them. It is my duty to ask of Miss Universe her Heart's Desire; and if it lies within my capabilities, to provide it for her."

He turned, approached the vivarium. "Miss Universe, it now becomes my privilege to ascertain your Heart's Desire."

The interpreter piped across his message. Miss Universe growled and grumbled a statement in return. The interpreter faced back to Clydell. The reporters poised their recorders; the TV cameras brought the scene to a hundred million eyes.

"She says she wants only one thing. That's him." The interpreter pointed at Tony.

Tony's knees went limp. "She wants me?"

"She says you must come to live with her at her palace on Mel. She says she likes you very much."

Tony laughed nervously. "I can't leave Earth . . . It's impossible!" Tony looked around the circle of faces. Clydell was solemn; the reporters were shaking their heads.

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The TV cameras scrutinized his face with impersonal glass eyes.

Why couldn't they wink?

The interpreter continued, "She says you come to spend at least a month with her."

Clydell said, "That's not unreasonable, Tony. A month soon passes."

The reporters agreed. "Sounds fair enough."

The interpreter remarked, "A year on Mel equals fourteen Earth-years."

Tony cried, "That makes a month more than an Earth-year!"

"Each year," said the interpreter, "is divided into four months."

"Cripes!" yelped Tony. "That's two and a half years!"

A reporter asked, "What's the basis for this beautiful friendship? Interests in common? Attraction of the minds? Romance of the souls?"

"Don't be asinine!" snarled Tony.

The interpreter said, "Miss Magdalipe likes the way he smells. He smells very good. She likes to pet him."

"Just a minute," said Tony. "I've got to check something. I want to talk to her alone." He moved forward as he spoke, brushing past Clydell and jostling him slightly, then as quickly apologizing. "Sorry, old man. That was awkward of me."

Tony entered the vivarium with the interpreter; Miss Universe thumped him cordially.

"Look here," said Tony. "You like the way I smell?"

Miss Universe croaked assent.

He stepped closer to her. "Smell me now. Do you notice a change?"

Miss Universe backed away, her massive thorax vibrating as if in startled affirmation.

"Well look here," Tony said. "You see that man with the pink face, in the light brown suit? He still smells the way I did. It was just temporary with me. With him it's permanent."

Clydell rapped the glass jovially. "What's going on in there?"

Tony and the interpreter came out. Miss Universe lumbered to the door of the vivarium.

The interpreter beckoned to Clydell. "Miss Universe wants to smell you."

"Sure," said Clydell breezily. "First I apply the old equalizer—so I don't smell Miss Mel." He sucked on his cigar, and letting a fine plume of smoke escape through his nostrils, approached Miss Universe.

She rumbled and banged Clydell on the back.

The interpreter said, "Miss Universe said the wrong thing. She don't want Tony. She wants *you*."

Tony nodded thoughtfully. "I thought she had made a mistake."

"I don't understand this!" cried Clydell.

"Looks like you're in for a trip to Mel," said one of the reporters.

"It's only a month, old man," said Tony.

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"You and your fancy ideas!" said Clydell savagely.

"I'll keep the office going, Hardeman."

Miss Universe's clumsy arm circled Clydell's waist. The interpreter said, "She is ready to go."

"But I'm not ready," cried Clydell. "I'm not even packed, I need clothes, my shaving equipment!"

"It's not cold on Mel. Especially inside the hive. You don't need clothes."

"My affairs, my business!"

"She says she wants to go now. Immediately—this minute."

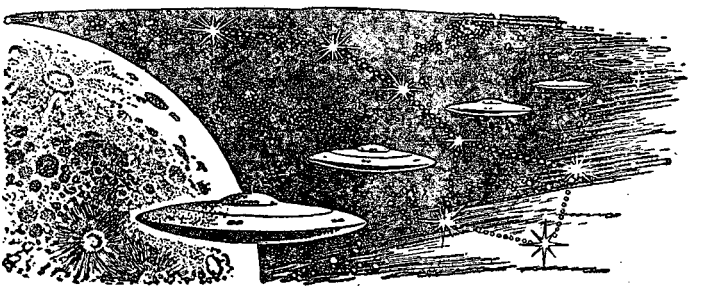
Tony smiled, remembering how badly he had been tempted to light the cigar he'd borrowed from Clydell only a moment before. If he had not jostled Clydell and returned the noxious weed to that inveterate smoker's pocket where would he be now? In Clydell's shoes, undoubtedly.

Tony's smile broadened. A fast thinker and a deviously subtle one was he! He'd even remembered Clydell's odd way with cigars. Clydell carried four or five, usually, in his vest pocket but just before lighting one he had a peculiar habit of transferring the weed to his loose, easily accessible jacket pocket, a vantage point or midway stop, so to speak, from whence he could the more readily pop it into his mouth.

On her home planet Miss Universe quite possibly reveled in the rich bouquet of decaying vegetable matter in lieu of champagne. Surely only decaying vegetation on an alien world could smell quite as rank as one of Clydell's cigars. Or possibly Miss Universe had even more decadent tastes, from a Terrestrial point of view, and feasted on—

Tony shuddered. Well, he might as well think it. Protein detritus—nitrogenous organic compounds yielding amino acids, in a state of advanced decay. *Dried death.*

Tony moved up close to the cage, the grin once more on his face. "Good-bye, old man!" he shouted. "Have a pleasant trip!"



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just for tonight

by . . . Russ Winterbotham

To come to grips with a merciless enemy on an alien planet can be a terrifying experience. It's even worse when the enemy is unknown.

IT WASN'T much of a fight. Bill Dwilly could have suffered fatal injuries at any time, of course, but he refused to give way to panic.

Actually, he didn't know what he was fighting. Something seemed to brush his arm, and when he looked down his sleeve had disappeared, and his arm was dripping blood.

Bill took no more chances. He just leveled his beam gun and blasted. With a dull rumbling trees, rocks and a lot of grade A dirt melted away in front of him.

After that nothing happened. Whatever it was that had jabbed so viciously at him had evidently been quite effectively taken care of. Bill put some stuff on his arm from his first-aid kit, and forgot about it. The arm probably would be sore for a few days, but the stuff in his kit could deal a death blow to almost any kind of infection.

He was straightening his gear when Jake Starr came running up. Jake was still wearing his breather mask because he didn't have strong enough lungs to get along on a minimum of oxygen.

In the early nineteen-thirties, when science-fiction was just emerging from its gusty, "roaring twenties" infancy the name of Russ Winterbotham was a cognomen to conjure with. It still is, for Mr. Winterbotham has kept well abreast of the times, and his stories mirror the newer and more realistic trends in star-bright fashion, as this exciting small yarn attests.

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"Trouble?" he mumbled through the mask.

Bill grimaced, looking first at his bandaged arm, and then at the blasted area directly in front of him. Any fool could have seen at a glance that something disturbingly unexpected had happened. But Jake always had to inquire about the obvious.

"No trouble at all," Bill said, with a slight, almost imperceptible sneer in his voice. "Just a light workout with one of Caesar's legions."

"Huh?" said Jake.

Bill ignored him. He was looking up at the sky. Somewhere out there, invisible of course, was the Earth—and one of those dim, twinkling stars was the Sun. The good old friendly Sun and the green hills and valleys of Earth. But here, he was light years from nowhere, presenting himself as a sitting duck to someone who attacked without warning and then darted away.

"How'd you get hurt?" Jake asked, apprehensively eying the bandage on Bill's arm. "And what happened to your *jacket?*"

"I don't know," Bill said.

"How could you get slashed up like that and lose the sleeve of your jacket without knowing exactly how it happened?"

"Whoever it was—" Bill stopped, then started over: "Somebody took a pot shot at me. I don't know how—or with what!"

"Oh!" Jake surveyed the leveled terrain. "Guess you showed him we can take care of ourselves."

"I've had no trouble since," said Bill.

Jake loosened his own beam gun, and stared uneasily about him. "You don't suppose whoever it was might come back?"

"It's not only possible, but highly probable," Bill said. "I wasn't attacked with an ordinary weapon. It might have been a low power beam on a tight focus. I don't suppose people carry weapons like that around in their pockets here any more than they do on Earth. So you can rest assured that whoever shot at me was prepared to cope with a drastic emergency. Our landing was probably seen, and somebody was sent here to dispose of us. When he doesn't return another alien somebody—bigger perhaps, with better weapons—is likely to follow."

Jake looked around, turning his head from left to right, scanning the horizon, watching. "We'd better not stay here, Bill," he said. "Let's go while they still have good reason to fear us."

Bill reached down and picked up his case. "Okay," he said. "I've got soil samples, and you've got samples of the air. We'll forget about the flora and fauna. We'll just label this planet hostile and let somebody else contact the intelligent life if they feel so inclined."

Bill fitted the case over his broad shoulders and shifted its weight until it nestled comfortably in the

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small of his back. Then he strode forward with Jake at his side.

"Don't walk so close," Bill warned, irritably.

"Eh? Why not? Am I bothering you?"

"No, but it's a wise precaution. If somebody decides to attack again, a single blast might finish us both. If we walk farther apart, one of us could duck, or even get the sniper with a return blast."

Jake gulped audibly, and swiftly moved a couple of yards to Bill's right. They were going back through the brush. It rose on all sides, in tropical density, so that they couldn't see the ship mounted on its legs ahead of them. Bill had blazed a trail of broken branches on the way out, and he had started by following them. But in the night the blazed patches were hard to see, and presently Bill took out his compass.

"Hell," he said. "We *must* have come more than a mile."

"I was just thinking that we ought to be back," Jake muttered. "Are you sure we're going in the right direction?"

Bill shook the compass, and then looked at its luminous dial again. "According to the dial readings we are."

"Compasses play queer tricks sometimes," said Jake. "We should have followed your trail."

"I can't in this darkness," Bill replied, flashing his light ahead.

Jake reached over and grabbed his arm. "Put it out!" he whispered hoarsely. "Something might see it."

Bill snapped out the light. "How do you think we're going to get out of here?"

Jake looked up through a break in the trees. There were plenty of stars, some of them dazzlingly bright. "I don't know," he said.

They were silent. Everything in the darkness about them was silent. One curious feature of this planet was the total lack of animal sounds. There were rustling leaves, a whispering of the wind through the branches, but no chirp of birds, or cries of small, scampering mammals. It was a chillingly quiet world. As a matter of fact, neither man could recall having seen anything stir—not even an insect.

"I don't like it," said Bill. "It's too unnaturally quiet. I'd like to hear a lion roar."

Only the wind answered.

"We know there's *something* here, Bill," said Jake. "It took a shot at your arm. Trees can't do that."

Bill reached up, and touched his bandage. "Can't they?" Now *he* was asking dumb questions. Of course a tree couldn't. A thorn might dig into his hide, maybe, but it couldn't dissolve his shirt sleeve.

"Come on," said Bill. "We could drive ourselves nuts standing here. We just haven't walked as far as we thought, that's all. The ship can't be far ahead."

They plodded ahead for five more minutes. Suddenly the brush

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vanished, and a great cleared space about five hundred feet across came into view a short distance ahead. Over the brush beyond it they saw the tip of the spaceship's nose.

"There!" said Bill. "What did I tell you?"

Jake laughed. It was a choking kind of a laugh. "Do you know what we did, Bill? We walked in a circle and came back to where we started from. That is the cleared space you made when you fired your beam gun!"

Even in the starlight there could be no mistaking the seared brush, the blackened and fused soil, even the fading warmth of the heat from the beam.

"I'll be damned," said Bill. "I'll check my compass."

He pulled the instrument from his pocket and sighted it on a glowing red star which hovered almost directly overhead. The Sun was nearby, proceeding westward just as it did on Earth.

He slipped the compass back in his pocket and listened. Only the wind and the leaves—nothing more.

"Are you *sure* this is the space," said Jake nervously.

"Of course I'm sure. I wasn't until I checked, but I'm sure now."

"Let's find one of those twigs you broke. We might have made a mistake. You said they have a beam gun something like yours. They could have blasted a place—"

"There's our spaceship, in the right direction," said Bill.

But he was moving forward, across the warm ground that he had recently blasted. He saw the place where he had bandaged his arm. Just beyond it was a tree, with a broken twig.

Bill grinned in the starlight. "Satisfied?" he asked.

Jake did not answer. His face was frozen in horror.

Then Bill heard it—the snap of a broken twig.

"The wind didn't do that!" Jake whispered hoarsely.

"Shh!" Bill motioned for silence. He took Jake's arm. To the right were two rocks, missed by his beam blast. He led Jake behind them and crouched beside him.

They listened and heard the sound of something blundering through the brush.

"It's coming back with a bigger weapon!" Jake whispered.

Bill nodded, his face as grim as death. It was coming from the direction of the space ship. That meant it had planned adroitly, and was trying to cut them off from any possibility of retreat. It knew where they were and was seeking them out. Getting lost had temporarily saved their lives. Had they gone on to the ship, they would have blundered into a trap.

Now Jake was tugging at his arm again. "Look!"

Jake was pointing over to the left—the direction from whence they had come.

Bill turned his eyes away from the brush, and stared into the

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cleared space. Something eerie was taking place there.

From the soil sprouted a multitude of tiny stalks. These were branching out, leafing as they arose. The whole seared area was full of brush again, looking as if nothing had touched it since the beginning of time.

"The thing isn't alive, Bill," Jake whispered. "It's plant life—"

"Nonsense! Plants can't think, or move around. We heard it moving and we know it can think because it's trying to trap us."

They listened. The stomping in the woods and the snapping of twigs grew louder.

Bill waited. He wondered if he'd ever see Earth again. He looked up at the stars, and his eyes widened in stunned disbelief. The heavens was moving *in the wrong direction!*

Sol, which had been ready to set in the west, was drifting like a cloud back eastward again. So were all of the stars, moving east instead of west at a pace so fast that it looked as if they were being projected by a moving beam in a planetarium!

"There it is!" Jake whispered.

Bill held his beam gun ready. He could barely see the figure through the brush that had regained its original growth. But someone was standing there, a tall humanoid figure turning his head from side to side, listening, watching.

"Shoot, Bill!" whispered Jake. "You must—"

Bill was watching the figure intently. His lips were white, and he could not turn away. He saw one of the figure's arms shoot out, take a branch and snap it.

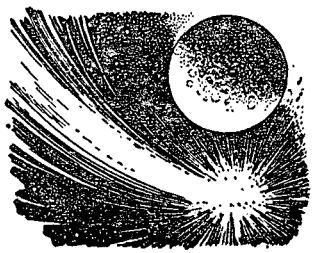
"I understand now!" Bill said excitedly. "That branch is the one I broke!"

But as Bill spoke, Jake drew his beam gun and fired. The shot went wild. Bill saw the figure grab his left arm.

"It's *me!*" he cried out. *"Time went backward!"*

But the words were drowned out in a burst of flame as the figure drew a weapon and raked the whole area with fire.

The trees whispered and the stars moved hurriedly back to their appointed courses.



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thing

by . . . Ivan Janvier

More enduring than the restless ebb and flow of the tides is the bright flame of Liberty's torch, for its splendor is star-guarded.

GORDON FUREY sat at his office desk, staring out over the harbor. The window was not a window—it was a flush-transmission TV transciever—and the workmen clustered around the Statue of Liberty, sparking their cutting torches, were swathed from head to foot in the dull gray cloth officially known as AntiRad.

A corner of Furey's mouth jabbed upward. In the City of New York, even Liberty was dangerously radioactive. Liberty was about to be cut up and towed out to sea, there to sink and be lost in the cold gray regions where the lonely anglerfish would light her way to the bottom.

The other corner of his mouth quirked upward, and suddenly he was smiling at himself for confusing thing and symbol. The symbol was lost. The thing remained, and, in time, would find a new symbol. Meanwhile it was up to him to keep the inner, enduring reality safe.

Don Garan cleared his throat. From his seat, at the other end of the desk and opposite Furey, he

There are probably no historical absolutes in human experience, for every precious gain which the human race has made is at the mercy of changing social patterns and catastrophic upheavals. The dignity of man will be assailed anew in every generation, and must be defended on a constantly shifting battlefield. With a rare fusion of courage, warmth and imaginative insight Ivan Janvier takes us here to a battlefield excitingly new.

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could not see the bright waters of the harbor.

"I have the report on Outlaw," he reminded his companion.

Furey picked up the typewritten sheets with interest. "Outlaw," he mused. "Interesting name he's picked for himself. Sense of humor, do you suppose?"

His gaze was intent.

Garan shrugged, his lean, hawkish face unconcerned. He was some years younger than Furey. "You'd think he'd be above human emotion."

Furey smiled. "Beyond, perhaps, but not above. Don't get the idea we're dealing with some legendary Overman, Don. He doesn't have to be above the flesh. He's not out to prove how much better he is. He *knows* he's better, and secure in that knowledge, he can relax. It's we who have to discipline ourselves so rigidly."

Garan stirred uncomfortably.

There was a buzz from the interoffice phone. Furey snapped the switch over. "Yes?"

"Mr. Henneken to see you, sir," the receptionist's voice said.

Garan raised an eyebrow. "That was fast."

Furey grinned wryly. "The power of the press. All right, Cissie, tell him to come in."

He switched off and rapidly pulled the significant pages out of the report. Slipping them into his desk drawer, he rearranged the remaining pages into the orderly semblance of a complete report. When Henneken came in, he and Garan were ready for him.

Henneken had not as yet grown fat and heavy with the weight of his power. He was still too young for that. His newspaper column had achieved national prominence before cynicism could strip away his hail-fellow-well-met casualness, and a kind of boyish charm which was at least four-fifths sincere.

"How are you, Henny?" Furey greeted him.

Henneken grinned and winked at Furey and Garan in turn. "So-so," he said. "I hear you've got a superman by the tail."

Garan turned visibly white. But Furey merely grimaced slightly as he rose and drew up a chair for the smiling young newspaperman.

"Just about," he said. "Is that in your column for today?"

Henneken sat down and carefully uptilted his brief case. "Nope. And it won't be, no matter what you may chose to tell me." He settled back in his chair, crossed his ankles, and, staring blankly up at the ceiling, began to dictate:

"Dateline open:

"Mr. and Mrs. America, today your columnist is privileged to reveal that the United States has, for many months, been in possession of a secret so valuable, so important in our fight for peace and prosperity, that your columnist, though involved in the program from the very first, has not been permitted, until

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now, to bring you this important information."

Henneken grinned blandly. "Get the drift?"

Furey chuckled. "You mean you'd like us to give you every scrap of information we have—now, and as we gather it. In return, you'll keep mum until we tell you—before anyone else has a chance to get on the inside track—that it's all right to give the public a serious jolt."

Henneken nodded and described a box with his hands in the air. "That's about the size of it."

"Now, wait a minute!" Garan broke in excitedly. "All he's got is the bare fact that we've found Outlaw. He's trying to trade a lucky-break tipoff for a complete knockdown on the case. Why should we give it to him?"

Henneken arched an eyebrow at Garan.

Furey shook his head in embarrassment. "Look, Don," he explained gently, "if Henny wanted to, he could dig out all this stuff for himself. How do you suppose he found out about it in the first place? Fortunately Henny's gentleman enough to come and tell us beforehand—and to offer his cooperation in return for ours."

"Sorry," Garan grunted. "My mistake."

Henneken waved a hand. "*De nada.* Think nothing of it."

Furey waved at the report on his desk, making up for Garan's outburst as smoothly as possible.

"Well, there it is. All of it. Marvin Gorcey was born in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, in nineteen forty-three. Normal childhood, as far as we know. We've called for his school psychiatrist's records on him, if any, but so far we've had no luck. Woonsocket got hit pretty hard. We have got various fringe reports—old friends, family doctor, three teachers and one scoutmaster. None of them ever noticed anything unusual about him. The concensus, as a matter of fact, indicates that he was considered pretty dumb.

"Normal adolescence—and this we *do* know. He went to high school in Providence, and the records were kept safe in accordance with the Diversification of Records and Safekeeping Act of Fifty-seven. The psychiatric concensus is that he was normal, if pretty dumb. There are references to a personality block, some repression, and occasional spasms of guilt—but nothing out of the ordinary, for Providence or anywhere else.

"Recommended therapy was noted, but never instituted—a standard operating procedure at the time. Who was going to appropriate money for a statewide therapeutic program? Besides, he was getting along fine as he was. He and several million other lads exactly like him.

"Normal post-adolescence, period. He married the gal from his Civics class, voted a straight party ticket, worked as a shipping clerk in a shoe factory, and was a mem-

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ber of the Elks in good standing. A solid, substantial citizen, still coming up in the world. You don't need an IQ of more than a hundred to be a good member of your community, and brains aren't as useful as experience, sometimes."

Furey looked up. "What it boils down to is this: before the war, Marvin Gorcey exhibited absolutely no signs of the mental ability he now displays. He certainly did not have enough imagination to even dream of changing his name to Eugene Outlaw. I doubt very much if he even knew what 'Eugene' meant. Even if he did, there was no reason for him to feel so different from humanity as to label the fact."

Henneken nodded. "But now, all of a sudden, he becomes a superman. When did it start?"

"With the war. He was caught on the fringe of the Providence bomb. His family, his factory, his lodge, and most of his friends were wiped out immediately. To all intents and purposes, he was a man with no past, and a problematical future. He suffered some superficial head burns, which cleared up in a few weeks without complications.

"He was released from the hospital, issued a ration card and twenty dollars in Federal scrip, and allowed to return to New England. He promptly disappeared. Two years ago, we discovered that every Governmental agency, from the local level on up, that ever came into contact with Eugene Outlaw was operating for his benefit.

"He wasn't greedy, and he was not a paranoid. He didn't keep anyone from handling the problems of other people in a normal and beneficial manner. They just took special care of him, on the side. He gets extra rations, and has a car, a house, an excellent job at high pay. He gets no parking tickets, pays no taxes, and goes to football games free."

Henneken nodded again. "What about those head burns?"

"We don't know. Radioactivity does not induce mutation in the subject exposed—except on the cellular level. In other words, he may get cancer, or lose the ability to manufacture red cells in his bone marrow. But there's only a slight chance that the change in the gene structure, if any, will produce a viable superior mutation in the next generation. It's been six years since the war, and we don't have any super-babies yet. We don't have very many monsters, either.

"In any case, Outlaw doesn't qualify. The only thing we can deduce is that the radioactivity damaged his brain, and that, by lucky accident, the cells that were killed were the ones that kept him stupid. You see what I mean? Assuming for a moment that anyone could be a superman if there wasn't something in his brain holding him back, then Outlaw—or Gorcey, whichever you prefer—hit the radioactive jackpot."

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Henneken nodded thoughtfully. "And that's all you've got? That's your theory?"

"That's our working assumption. We haven't dared send anybody into the area. All our probing's been at long distance, checking records and carefully interviewing travelers from the area where he operates. We can be reasonably sure he doesn't know about this branch of the government. If he's allowed to find out, and discovers we're investigating him, he'll do to us whatever he's done to the key people up there."

Henneken whistled. "That's a tough proposition."

Furey nodded slowly.

Garan waited until he heard the outer office door close behind Henneken, and then he said: "Pretty slick. You tell him something so close to the truth it can't be checked, but far enough away to keep him from getting anywhere on his own."

Furey looked at him sourly. "That's what you think. Give him just three days, and he'll have it all figured out. We're lucky to wangle that much." He leaned forward. "Look, Don, we're dealing with Henny Henneken, not some part-time stringer for the *Vineland Times-Journal*. He's as good as a separate branch of government any day. As a matter of fact, he's got sources scattered all over the place. Anything we know, he knows. Maybe a few days later, but he knows."

"Yeah," Garan agreed with the air of a man unwrapping a bombshell, "I guess you're right. Maybe we ought to do something about that secretary of yours, Cissie."

Furey doused the bomb in cold water with a tilt of his mouth. "Cissie's a good, efficient secretary. She does her job for me. If she feels she needs extra money and works for Henny on the side, you can be sure any other girl I might hire would succumb to the same temptation. Some day, she's going to put me in a spot by becoming careless, and letting me catch her officially. Then I'll have to fire her. That's the chance she's taking."

"And meanwhile that's the chance you're taking with Henny," Garan shot back, annoyed.

Furey sighed. "Don, we've learned to live with radioactivity. It's a statistical fact that kids are being born with a higher index of resistance to the stuff. Meanwhile, we keep to the decontaminated areas and wear our AntiRad topcoats."

He pointed to the revised map of the United States hanging on the wall. "That's *us*. That's a whole country full of people—ninety-nine million of us—learning to live with things that would have killed our parents, physically or spiritually. Our job, here, is to make sure those people can handle any new danger that may crop up. In its own way, that involves learning to live with Henny Henneken. And with Eugene Outlaw."

Furey re-read the report for the

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third time, excitement rising high within him. There were photographs of Eugene Outlaw, clipped from newspapers, captioned: "Leading Citizen Dedicates New Public Building." There were society columns: "Local Philanthropist and Prominent Businessman weds Daughter of Governor." Outlaw had progressed.

And it was the direction and manner of that progress that were beginning to strike significant chords in Furey.

Take an ordinary, average man, add the ability to acquire anything within the scope of his ambition, mix well, and you got captions like: "Local Philanthropist and Prominent Businessman weds Daughter of Governor." *Not* "Daughter of Governor Weds." *Not:* "New Public Building Dedicated. Present were Joe Smith, Mayor, Bill Jones, Selectman, and Eugene Outlaw, leading citizen." You got free football tickets, no taxes, extra rations. And who did the little tailor marry after he killed the giant? Why, the Prince's daughter, of course!

Marvin Gorcey hadn't changed. He'd changed his name, true. A little boy with a bedsheet knotted around his shoulders doesn't jump off the front stoop yelling, "I'm Willie Polovinsky!" What he yells is: "I'm Superman!"

And so he was. So he certainly was. But he had all the unchanneled, unrealistic imagination of that little boy. He'd rather move mountains to dam the raging waters than get the state legislature to institute a program of flood control.

He was superman, all right. But not because of something inherent in himself. Not because lifelong barriers to superior mental ability had been removed. He was the same, average guy he'd always been. Something new had been added—something from outside.

And what if a dedicated, trained, imaginative man found a way to tap the same mysterious source of power, and applied it to something useful? What if he used it to administer wisely, and kept the naiton secure, and independent, able to face the future without fear?

How would a man like Gordon Furey go about transferring Outlaw's ability to himself? How would a man like Gordon Furey go about getting in contact with Eugene Outlaw?

That afternoon Furey went down to Penn Station and bought his own tickets to Providence, without asking Cissie to get them for him. And then he officially gave himself a vacation, had Cissie arrange transportation to Florida, and bought a large-size bottle of suntan oil which seemed highly incongruous when he unpacked his bag in the chill of the Rhode Island hotel room . . .

Keeping a superman under surveillance wasn't too difficult if you took care not to forget that he wasn't as smart as he appeared to be. Outlaw's imagination was strictly limited. He could no more see the signposts he'd erected all

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around himself than he could foresee that any disturbance in the large-scale normal pattern of human actions would inevitably be detected. He was instinctively wary—as a cat is wary when it walks across bared copper wire after first assuring itself that it can't possibly trip.

Furey played his quarry as he might have played a big, powerful fish in a breakout-proof tank. He took his time, knowing that even after Henny Henneken found out that the radioactivity claptrap was a blind, he would have to discover where Furey was hiding and duplicate all the spadework his unseen adversary had already put in. Furey had a week, at least.

He made a thorough, cautious study of Outlaw's habits. He found out exactly who the most frequent visitors to his home were, and what time he arose in the morning and retired at night. He discovered that there was a constant stream of messengers coming to the man's home with invitations, personal notes, letters too delicate to be entrusted to the mails, and the like.

Therefore, on the third day of his stay in Providence, Gordon Furey knocked on Outlaw's front door with a relaxed attitude of mind and a look of sanguine ordinariness on his face. He informed the butler that he bore a message, was promptly ushered to Outlaw's study, and waited expectantly for the thoroughly average man behind the desk to look up.

When he did, Outlaw gave him a glance as startling as it was candid. "Please sit down, Mr. Furey," he said. "I'm very glad to see you. *It* has been expecting you."

Furey lowered himself warily into a chair. It took him a a full minute before he could get back the self-assurance that had walked with him only a moment before.

"Glad to see *you*, Mr. Outlaw," he replied after that vitally necessary moment. "It?"

Outlaw nodded gravely. "Yes. It had been living in Providence for quite some time. It doesn't come from this planet, of course, but it had been quite comfortable here for several hundred years. It's a symbiote, you see. It lives in people, and gives them what they want in return. But it likes to be comfortable. When the bomb fell, it was very unhappy."

Furey was having trouble lowering his threshold of incredulity to match the speed of Outlaw's revelations. But somehow, miraculously, he managed. "So it picked you for its next host," he deduced.

Outlaw nodded again. "That's right. But I can't give it everything it wants now, and frankly, Mr. Furey, I don't like it either. It's emotionally exhausting to work at top speed all the time.

"It knows that one person can't keep it happy any more," Outlaw went on. "Society's gotten too big for it. It wants to make sure there aren't any more bombs, or any

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other dangers to annoy it. So it wants to live in *you.*" He looked at Furey hopefully. "It doesn't hurt," he said. "It's very comfortable, really. It's just that it *pushes* you . . ."

Furey nodded. Here it was. Here it was, being handed to him. The ultimate tool for freedom. He felt a faint prickling of pride that it had chosen him.

"Of course," he said. "That's what I came for."

Outlaw stood up, extending his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Furey," he said in a relieved voice.

He and Furey shook hands. It crossed over. There was the faintest of nerve-root pricklings, a momentary twinge of pain, and it began to live in Furey.

✿ ✿ ✿

Henny Henneken watched Furey walk away. His skin felt cold at the realization that the man had gotten so close. But not close enough. He must have been terribly disappointed to discover that Outlaw had already lost his power to someone else—that another had gotten there ahead of him. He wondered if Furey knew who the someone was.

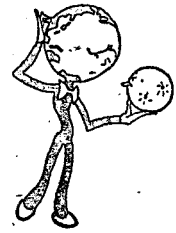
Oh, well, it didn't matter. Fairly soon, Furey's concepts of government wouldn't matter at all.

✿ ✿ ✿

Eugene Outlaw looked up for the third time that night. "Please sit down, Mr. Garan," he said, more relieved than he could express that the last part of his burden was finally going to be taken from him. "Please sit down," he repeated. "It's been waiting."

✿ ✿ ✿

And so the three supermen went back to New York along their various routes, each ready to keep the bombs from falling.



There's a rare and memorable treat in store for you in our next issue—a startlingly original feature novelette by top-echelon science-fantasy writer, William Scarff. It's called JUST AROUND THE CORNER, *and it's about an unusual individual's breathlessly exciting search for uncharted pathways on the frontiers of tomorrow. You'll hear daring voices and thrill to an unfolding psychological magic as swift as it is biting and suspenseful.*

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action—reaction

by . . . F. B. Bryning

If you go plunging out into the dark night of space getting back alive may become a major problem.

FROM A LOCKER close by the door into the after airlock, Dr. Gerald Allison, Astronomer-Commander of Space Station Commonwealth Three, took a broad belt with a reel of heavy-gauge nylon line attached. He turned to Dr. Vivienne Gale.

"Remember, above all," he warned her, "this is your lifeline!"

He passed the belt around her waist and through the loops in her space suit, so that it held the reel at the small of her back.

"Outside," Allison explained, "it's not enough to rely on magnetics alone. As you know already, it's rather easy to break your foot connection with the Station at any time. Inside it doesn't matter—you'll float against a wall or the ceiling sooner or later. But outside there's no limit to where you might go."

"Drifting forever among the stars . . ." she intoned mischievously. "The prospect has a certain fascination.—"

"For the first few hours, perhaps, while your oxygen lasted," said Allison. "After that you

At the risk of seeming over-enthusiastic, even critically injudicious we are determined to be completely honest about this story. We honestly think it's quite the most exciting story we've ever published in that department of science-fiction which concerns itself with characters and situations well within the scope of a realizable tomorrow. F. B. Bryning from "Down Under" has come up with another space yarn of rare distinction.

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wouldn't get much pleasure out of it."

"You'd become, no doubt, Earth's newest satellite—its first blue-eyed blonde one," chimed in Assistant-Biologist Daniel Phelan, who was also getting into a space suit. "And you'd remain in a state of perfect preservation at minus two hundred and seventy-three degrees centrigrade."

"I'm sorry, Commander," she said contritely. "I was joking."

"So were we," replied Allison, who had not paused in fastening her harness. "But not about safety. So listen carefully. Your lifeline has this spring clip at the end. Outside you must clip it to the nearest handhold, ring-bolt, or rail to where you are working. After paying out enough to give you freedom of movement you lock the reel—like this. If you should break your magnetic foothold and float off the Station, you can haul yourself back."

"May I try that locking catch?" Vivienne Gale asked.

"You have a hundred yards of line," Allison continued, as she worked the catch a few times. "That's more than enough—even for transferring between supply rocket and Station. There's a strong rewinding spring on the reel which can be cut in or out, like this, if you need it."

She tried the rewind lever. "Now, before I put on my helmet, Dr. Allison, thanks for allowing me to go outside."

He smiled at sight of her standing there—the insulated, airtight suit enveloping her from neck to toe-tips and finger-tips. She looked like a deep-sea diver's apprentice alongside Phelan, the biggest man in the Station, made bulkier with the compressed-air reaction motor on his back, which Allison insisted he wear all the time he was beyond the outside door of the airlock.

"You have permission, as our guest, to go outside," said Allison, "simply because we find it difficult here to refuse Dr. Vivienne Gale *anything!*"

"You can double that," agreed Phelan fervently, "and redouble *it!*"

The entire personnel of Space Station Commonwealth Three had a high regard for Vivienne Gale after less than 80 hours' acquaintance. And it wasn't purely because she was good to look at. They were still deeply moved by the feat she had performed just three days before, when she had braved the hazards and endured the ordeals of a fast emergency rocket voyage out from Earth, to save the life of one of their number by a surgical operation.

"You make me feel like a spoiled child," she protested. "But thank you anyway."

Allison took her helmet from the locker and came forward. "When this is on, as you may remember, you will not be able to hear very well," he said. "Outside, in the vacuum of space, with no air to

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transmit sound waves, you will hear nothing beyond your helmet. But you will not need to be burdened with walkie-talkies. You will be able to converse with Dr. Phelan if your two helmets are in contact. Vibration of the helmets themselves will transmit speech quite well, although rather thinly."

"I shall keep close to Dr. Phelan."

"Good! And when not in helmet contact you can both convey a lot with simple signs and gestures. But remember, above all, that lifeline!"

The Sun was behind the Earth, and it was night over the entire hemisphere visible from the Station—from the Caroline Islands, in the east, almost to Mauritius, in the west, and from Kyushu, in the north, down across the South Pole and all Antarctia, to the Weddell Sea. In the center the island-continent of Australia lay dark between the glimmering, starlit Pacific and Indian Oceans. Inland, the great Eyre Sea gleamed in pale and solitary splendor.

Sunlight, diffused through the atmosphere, made a narrow circle of brilliance around the Earth, which, through its filmy envelope of cloud-flecked air, looked rather like a milky opal. Beyond it, the stars—a pastel-tinted confetti of light, all dots or discs with never a twinkle or conventional pointed shape—stared unwaveringly.

Once through the after airlock Vivienne Gale went down on hands and knees. As Phelan lifted her up she could see him grinning. He put his helmet against hers.

"No need to crawl," he called. "It gets us all that way the first time or so outside. You'll soon get over it."

"It's so—so grand," she piped. "It makes me feel infinitely small. And the way this hull curves away on all sides! I feel I'll slip off if I move!"

"You won't." His voice was thin and reedy.

"I'll be all right. But will you please hold my arm for awhile?"

"Gladly!" He marched her around the hull to the other side, to the foot of a tall tripod which extended out about forty feet. He pointed to a polished metal cylinder at the top, and touched helmets. "That's where the specimens are. We'll hook on here."

Handing her his carrying rack he clipped both their lifeliness to a rail close against the hull. Then he paid out a few feet of her line and locked the reel. Taking the carrying rack again, he made helmets contact.

"I'll be about ten minutes."

Unclipping his magnetics and leaving them on the hull, he leaped lightly upwards to the polished cylinder at the end of the outrigger. For this there was no occasion to use the reaction motor on his back, which he carried only for emergency.

Weightless, anchored by her magnetics, and swaying slightly, Dr. Gale stood without effort, and

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watched Phelan's silhouette against the stars as he worked. Like a bee at a flower, she thought, and felt the comparison to be apt enough in view of the nature of his task.

For in that casket, she knew, were possibly some of the very seeds of life. Set out as far as possible from radiation of heat from the Station—polished to reflect away any heat which might reach it, and movable with its outrigger to keep always on the dark side of the Station—it held between its two open ends the spores of certain moulds and yeasts, encysted algae and infusoria, and bacteria. These it exposed to the heatless vacuum of space, to radiate away every vestige of heat until their temperature approximated minus 273 degrees Centigrade—absolute zero.

If, as appeared to have been demonstrated already, some of those spores could endure absolute zero temperature for months and still reproduce the life that was in them—or if, as had yet to be demonstrated, they could endure it for years, and still live, it would seem to justify a certain intriguing theory advanced early in the twentieth century by Svante Arrhenius, Swedish astroner and physicist. It might then be true, as Arrhenius had suggested, that life-bearing spores, many of them minute enough to be carried out to the fringe of a planet's atmosphere and driven by the "pressure" of light, could be the means of conveying life from planet to planet about the universe.

Phelan hauled himself down again, and worked his feet into his magnetics. In his rack were now a few dozen four-inch square frames, each holding a specimen-impregated membrane. At absolute zero temperature they were more brittle than the finest glass, and could not have survived a sudden transition into the normal air inside the Station, which was nearly 350 degrees hotter.

So, inside the airlock, before closing the outer hatch, Phelan had to transfer the frames to an insulated container, where they could regain heat gradually enough not to shatter themselves.

Shedding his reaction motor to give him freedom of action within the relatively confined space of the airlock, he fixed it in a wall clip, and set to work. It was a slow job, handling the fragile frames with thickly gloved hands. Dr. Gale helped by sealing the pockets as he filled them.

Then it happened—so simply and naturally do the established reactions of a lifetime assert themselves in unguarded moments and negate the training of mere months, or even years.

Phelan had evidently miscounted, for as he moved the carrying rack aside and rammed it into a clip, one last frame floated away from it towards the open hatch. Seeing it, Dr. Gale tapped him on the arm and pointed.

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As the precious frame was on the point of disappearing, Phelan sprang after it.

Realizing then that he was not anchored, Vivienne Gale moved forward quickly and caught him by the ankle. She checked his plunge considerably, but was herself jerked off her feet, through the hatch, and off the Station.

Too late, she grabbed wildly at the hatch door just three inches beyond her reach, to succeed only in twisting herself and Phelan about, and losing her grip on him.

Close together they drifted slowly into space—she tumbling and writhing helplessly, he whirling his arms in the spaceman's method of maneuvering himself.

Just as the space rocket or the Station itself may be "trimmed" by turning a flywheel inside it, so that the bearings to which the ship is fixed react in the opposite direction, so the turning of the humerus bones in his shoulder sockets brought Phelan's body into control.

Quickly he pulled out a length of his lifeline and threw it about Dr. Gale. As he rolled herself in it he drew her within reach. By then they were ten or twelve yards out from the Station and drifting slowly farther from it.

Holding her helmet against his own, Phelan spoke tensely. "We're in a bad spot, thanks to my idiocy," he snapped. "You shouldn't have tried to save me."

"I was an idiot, too," she admitted. "I should have clipped my line on somewhere, *then* jumped after you. But no more self-reproaches. Can we *do* anything?"

"Without my reaction motor—not much, I'm afraid. Only a reaction device of some kind could arrest this drift and send us back again, and mine's in that airlock. Our oxygen tanks could be used as jets, but there's not enough gas or pressure in them to do the job. Besides, we'd suffocate at once if we used up our oxygen that way."

He stared at her grimly.

"At once," she repeated. "Instead of—later. There's little hope for us, then?"

He was silent for a few moments. "We are a 'closed system.' Every action we take will be cancelled out by an equal and opposite reaction. If we had enough detachable items like magnetics, harness, tools, and such like, and if we could throw them hard enough in the direction we are drifting, the reaction would slow us down, stop us, and then send us on our way back. But we have only a pound or two of mass to dispose of. We would have to throw that so hard that—well, it's far beyond our strength."

"What would happen if you threw me?"

"Nothing," Phelan growled. "I wouldn't do it!"

"You could still rescue me with your reaction motor, or a lifeboat, couldn't you, if you got back?"

"No hope. You'd be out of sight.

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A needle in a haystack would be easy by comparison."

"What would happen, then, if you threw me without casting me loose—with the line attached to us both?"

"What do you weigh?"

"Eight stone ten."

"A hundred and twenty-two pounds," he calculated. "I weigh a hundred and ninety-four—ratio roughly two to three. If I threw you you would move away from this spot at the rate of three feet for every two feet I moved in the opposite direction. Eventually the line between us would jerk taut. We'd stop flying apart, and then begin to drift together again, you coming three feet to my two, whether we did nothing or hauled in fast. We'd meet again just where we would have drifted to if we had done nothing. And we'd get there in exactly the same time."

"To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," she quoted. "We can't prove Newton wrong."

"Exactly," agreed Phelan grimly. "We are now about thirty to forty yards from the Station," he said, tensely. "We have exactly two hundred yards of line between us. We could join lines, and if I could throw you back there hard enough you might reach the Station in time to get a grip before the line pulled taut and yanked you out of reach again." Taking the end of her line he quickly clipped his own line to it. "We'd better try it at once."

He cut out the rewind mechanisms of both reels, coiled a few feet of the line, and threw it out into space at right angles to their line of drift.

"Now," he continued, "unreel your line and pay it out to the very end. Space will take care of it. If you reach the Station you must cling like a limpet to the first hand-hold you find."

"I'll slip any slack line through the hand-hold," she suggested. "That will take the jerk."

"Good! Now can you hold yourself rigid, like a spear? No—you needn't. You can push harder with your legs than I can with my arms. And you'll be more accurate if you dive for the target than if I throw you. Agreed?"

"I think you're right."

"Then we'll plant your feet on my solar plexus. You'll have to sit on your heels until this slight movement of ours swings you into line between the Station and me. When the Station seems to be directly above you, you must dive at it, arms above you head, to help your sight on it. Above all, you must thrust hard with your feet. Use every ounce of strength you have. Try to push my innards through my backbone!"

It seemed to Vivienne Gale that their plan had failed at the moment it began. In spite of her utmost effort her dive towards the Station gave her no other sensation than that of ground falling away beneath her feet. "Above"

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her, between her outstretched hands, the black bulk of the Station seemed no nearer than before.

Or did it? With narrowed eyes she studied the tiny discs that were the stars closest against its edge. Was it beginning to blot them out? Was it expanding?

Phelan was full of the sense of movement. For him the stars were again ribbons of light as he somersaulted away from her feet.

Urgently he whirled his arms, for he had two things to do which could not be delayed. As his tumbling stopped he worked quickly to free himself from the several yards of line which had fouled his legs and body. Every inch of it might be needed if she were to reach the Station.

Then he tackled his second task, held in mind from the beginning, but not mentioned to her. With clumsy, gloved hands he began to unfasten his harness in order to detach his reel.

He was determined that if the line were to jerk taut between them it would not drag her back to die of suffocation in her space suit. That would be for him only, whose folly had earned him such an end . . .

He proposed to hold the line itself, lightly, about fifteen feet from the reel, which would float free. Should she reach the Station and begin to haul him in, he believed he would know it by the run of the line—and he would hold on.

If, though, the line were to jerk sharply through his fingers, she would not have reached the Station, although she might be only a few feet from it. He would then let go, so that she, at least, might save herself.

He was finding it difficult, with the gloves, to unbuckle his belt. As the seconds passed he worked more hurriedly, frantically.

There came a sharp tug on the line, and he swore desparingly in the privacy of his helmet.

Too late! His belt, still fastened, had taken the pull. His outward drift had been checked back to what it had been. Her approach to the Station, if any, must also have been cut short. She would be drifting back once more. They had failed. There would be no chance to try again.

The jerk had tumbled him about, although less violently than before. Savagely he swung his arms to get into a seeing position.

When he was able, he examined the silhouette of the Station for some sign of her returning to rendezvous with him. He had not the heart to hasten their meetings by hauling on the line. His gaze had traversed almost the entire outline of the Station when he was startled to feel a steady and rhythmic traction on the line.

Phelan took hold of his line and began, gingerly, to haul in. He began to see details of the Station again—the dim light through a porthole or two, and the swivelled

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domes of the astronomical observatory section.

Suddenly, "below," half in the inky shadow of a laboratory turret, there was a small, space-suited figure hauling on a line which ran down through a hand-hold and up to him.

Magnetics firmly planted on the metal hull once more, he held her helmet against his own.

"I could have sworn you hadn't reached here when that line jerked taut!"

"I hadn't," she replied. "I overshot the Station about ten feet up. When the line jerked I was about twenty yards beyond it."

"Beyond!" he echoed, aghast at the thought of what would have happened had he succeeded in releasing his end. "How did you get down?"

"I began to drift back. In a sort of panic I tried to stretch down and connect with my magnetics."

"Yes, go on."

"I took them off and tried to swing myself around to threw then away from the Station—action and reaction, you know! But I couldn't maneuver myself properly, like you do. Then I noticed a lot of slack in the line. I hauled some in, tied my magnetics on to it, and pushed them down gently. They stuck—and I drew myself down, very slowly and carfeully."

He made no answer. He was silent for so long that she asked: "Is anything wrong?"

"Not a thing," he replied. "I was just thinking that if I hadn't talked so much you might have thought of that trick with the magnetics in the first place."

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jack the giant killer

by . . . Bryce Walton

The child Franz served only the pitiless cruelty of a world gone mad. But what is murdered in the day will wake at night screaming.

ONLY NINE YEARS old, he thought—and already a Junior Investigator! Franz lay abed in his room at School of Orthodoxy No. 3, staring into the darkness, his pride and joy unconfined. What a great moment! What a shining milestone in his young life!

Franz lay rejoicing in the dark, and after a while he tried to sleep. Maybe some kids, some adults even, were afraid of being alone. But not an Investigator. An Investigator wasn't even afraid of being afraid.

He tried to fight off the mushy sick ache for someone to be there in the room with him. Some woman even, he thought. Someone warm and sympathetic and consoling who would put soft arms around him . . .

Franz gulped and grimaced in the dark to keep from despising himself. Surely it was a privilege to be alone. Only an Investigator, one of the privileged, *could* be alone. And yet—was there perhaps some small, hidden flaw in the nightly solitude? Might it not be just barely possible that if a person wasn't required to be alone at night

Some ten years ago Bryce Walton had the singular temerity to entitle his first successful science-fiction story, THE ULTIMATE WORLD. *He thus set an incredibly difficult goal for himself, for to travel beyond the ultimate requires imaginative dexterity of a high order. But Mr. Walton's continuous wide popularity as a science-fantasy Marco Polo proves that no goal need remain unattainable, when the future beckons as excitingly as it does here.*

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sleep would come swiftly and naturally, and he would never be afraid of having dreams.

Dreams were an irrational delusion and a snare, and they had no place in the real world. They were a dreadful threat to total security. Who knew what subversion might not be buried in the unconscious?

Weren't dreams the sneaking voice of the unconscious in all of its ugly primitiveness? Sure they were. If you had them you had to confess them because they were sins. If you confessed them, your brain could be washed out, and after that, you wouldn't dream any more. You wouldn't do much of anything any more except the few simple things a robot could do better.

Sleep, Franz, sleep. You've a hard day ahead of you tomorrow. You've got a lot of Investigating to do. Remember—you're a Junior Investigator now.

It was much worse in the dark. When it was dark, he could not shake off the feeling of another presence in the room with him. Something mushy. It had happened before, often, but now it was so alarming that he got up suddenly, and switched all the lights on.

The thing wasn't visible. But outside the window, in the whirring whine of the City, he could still feel its cautiously withdrawing presence. Something watching. Something real mushy.

Franz curled up, clutching his knees and suddenly he felt that he was floating. He knew without caring any longer, that he was falling asleep—finally making it, just too desperately tired to stay awake another instant.

It was as he had feared. The figure, the warm promising transparency, came drifting toward him, its pale face sweetly smiling. The warm white arms reached out to comfort him and a voice started whispering close to his ear:

"Jack. Jack, darling. Wake up. You're going to climb the beanstalk."

"Once upon a time . . .

"Long long ago . . ."

Bedtime stories. Fairy tale lullabies hummed to a Junior Investigator!

He woke up screaming and bathed in cold sweat.

Gray morning light moved through the window, creeping slowly up the naked metal walls of his room, over the single cot, the locker, and the small metal desk.

He jumped out of bed, anxious to forget the dreadful, sickening dream. He didn't put on the new Junior Investigator's uniform as he had planned. He put on play shorts instead, ignoring the glittering splendor of the official costume, and carried it to his locker with resolutely averted eyes.

He was winning the confidence of that mushy little Marie, so play shorts would serve his purpose best. Later he would take the uniform to school with him, and put it on secretly during recess. None of the

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kids knew that he was an Investigator, or how many of them he'd be duty-bound to turn in as suspects.

Take Marie, for instance. He was sure Marie had a fairy-tale book hidden somewhere, and that she had dreams as dreadful as his own. All he needed now was a confession from her own lips. Words he could get down on the tape, and give to the SG boys.

Maybe today he would get the direct evidence that would establish her guilt.

As he was drinking his breakfast from the automeal, Marie, as usual, knocked impudently on the door. She was a saucy little girl to be only seven, he thought—stuck up and mushy. She tried to act grown up, but that was a laugh, really. All the kids were such bores—laughing and shrieking and playing their childish games.

But he had to play with them, had to make a pretense of playing. How else could he get the evidence he needed?

"Come in," he said.

Her blonde hair was in braids, and she was wearing play shorts striped soberly in black and gray. She gazed at him curiously out of light blue eyes, and put her hand trustingly on his arm. That was Marie—gushy and mushy all the way through.

"I passed your door last night," she said. "I heard you crying."

"Not me," Franz said, staring at her in alarm.

"I heard you crying," she insisted, looking around slowly. She lowered her voice. "Were you having a—dream?"

He shook her hand off his arm. It felt moist and hot. "You'd better not use that word," he said quickly.

"I bet you were having a dream," she said. "You can tell me, Franz. I've got an idea about dreams. Everybody dreams, but nobody's supposed to. So everybody forgets."

"You'd better forget. Let's go out and play."

"Next time I hear you crying at night, Franz, I'll come in and sit with you. You stay by yourself too much."

"I never dream," Franz said, avoiding her eyes. "It's subversive."

"Dreams never used to be bad, did they? Now a dream's bad, even when it's good?"

"How do you know?" He had the recorder turned on. Fortunately it was concealed beneath the loose folds of his play suit, a tiny metal box with a loop antenna.

Her wide blue eyes smiled at him slowly. "I never dream, Franz."

Not another word could he get out of her about dreams. No information—not even the possible location of the fairy-tale book which he was sure she had managed to conceal on the school grounds. Well, he could search for the book later. He had plenty of time.

When the play-period bell rang, Franz returned to his room, and

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emerged with the uniform concealed inside a toy box. He stopped at a public park three blocks away, and put the resplendent costume on in the washroom.

The other kids couldn't leave the school except by special permission. Most of them went home weekends to live with their guardians, but a Junior Investigator could go anywhere he liked, any time the urge to roam took firm hold of him.

He walked slowly, rigidly, along the winding pathway of the Concourse where it twisted five hundred feet up among the hanging gardens of the City. He breathed deeply of the crisp, cool air and forgot about the fear, the aloneness, and the dreams. The dreams hadn't happened. Not to him. They couldn't happen to a Junior Investigator!

He told himself that he had nothing at all in common with the other kids. On the contrary, in his uniform, he felt quite as big and important as the adults he passed on the Concourse. The adults only *looked* bigger than he was. True, they were taller physically, but as an Investigator he was really far more important than any of them. And as soon as the Security Guards gave him a shock-box, he could stop any of those "giants" anywhere—the instant he caught them doing or saying anything suspicious. Shock them and give them a quick little brain probe right there on the spot.

So who was bigger? Name him!

The sun glinted on his badge and on the lightning flash insignia of the Omega Security Corps. He walked proudly among the giants, and inside himself he was laughing. When he stepped inside the tubeway, he seemed actually to float in a little cloud of power, safe and satisfied within his secret aura of strength. He was conscious of how enviously people stared at him. There was jealousy in their glances—and a fearful respect.

But still he was only a Junior Investigator, and he had an impatient, unruly longing to do some real grown-up investigating as soon as possible. He didn't want to attend lectures, drills, orientation sessions with the SG and the Young Defenders all the time. He wanted to be running around in intrigue, spying, stealth, sneaking, peeping and sly listening. He wanted to brain-probe, brain-wash and put risks on the griddle, forcing them to talk under duress. He'd know how to open up their minds.

He walked faster.

What could General Kerf, Chief of the Security Guards, want with him? Was he about to be given a more adult assignment? Would he actually get his shock-box now? He kept his eyes and ears sharpened as he walked, alert for any slight sign of disloyalty among the citizenry.

You never knew who might be a mystic, an irrational, a Reb, a free-thinker, or a loner. You had

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to be alert for little signs that only an Investigator could see. Sometimes Franz could *smell* a risk.

Like the woman he suddenly saw standing by herself on Tier Eight. He stopped the instant his gaze came to rest upon her. He waited patiently for ten minutes and then he flashed the identification beam on her from his concealed SG kit. Like an accusing finger the personalized vibratory-beam identity report went straight back to Headquarters Lab in the heart of the Security Ad Building. With it, Franz sent merely the one accusative word: "Loner."

The Investigator's Manual stated that any man or woman found standing alone for ten or more minutes was plainly guilty of fantasy construction on a dangerously secretive level.

Before Franz walked half a block away he saw the SG skycar swoop down and suck the screaming, wildly terrified woman into its yawning vacuumatic pickup tubes.

No one else dared to notice. Franz's eager eyes bounced all over the faceless bulk of the crowd, searching for someone who might be curious enough to be looking. But the others knew that anyone displaying curiosity would have shared the woman's fate, guilt by association being a grievous crime.

Franz felt very proud of his high score. As far as he knew, he was the youngest of the Junior Investigators and he dwelt with pleasure on his most recent triumph. The woman loner would probably get off with a third-degree brain wash. A loner seldom got a first degree wash job. But what happened to them after he exposed them wasn't important. Only his official rating was important.

Standing at last in General Kerf's presence, Franz snapped to attention and saluted smartly.

General Kerf returned the salute. He was a tall, aloof and slimly powerful man attired in a SG uniform of funeral black, and just returning his stare made Franz realize how many notches you had to have on your spying-disk before you could become a Senior Investigator. And a General—

General Kerf's bone-shadowed face tilted, and his eyes were suddenly like powdered glass shining down on young Franz.

"We think you're ready for your first really big assignment, Franz," he said.

Franz couldn't say anything. His throat was too tight, and his breathing too agitated.

"You've an excellent record, young Franz," the general went on quickly. "When you turned your Mother in at four you proved yourself a devoted investigator. Your father too, for hiding a forbidden book and a file of sheet music of the old era. Do you remember how at seven you found your uncle reading poetry and exposed him instantly? Spotting subversive poetry, mechanistic stuff, at that age! Remarkable, Franz!"

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"Thank you, sir. May I remind you that in the same year I caught my cousin and aunt plotting to sneak into the country. I knew there was no reason for that, so I looked it up in the Code Book. They were guilty of mysticism. They were trying to get in touch with nature spirits, to help them rebel. I reported them both. Remember?"

General Kerf smiled. "I remember, Franz. Your exceptional hereditary qualities as a spy has influenced our decision to give you a more vital assignment. You'll be privileged to spy on someone really important—your Guardian."

"My—my Guardian!" Franz whispered. It was almost too good to be true.

"That's correct. When we assigned you to Professor Hans Schaeffer as a ward we hoped that you would prove capable of Investigating him."

"But he's so—so powerful, sir. The Overseer of the Omega Calculator!"

"Exactly, Franz. The Overseer of the Omega. Few Senior Investigators could be trusted with this task and those few could not see Schaeffer constantly without arousing his suspicion. He's in a position to do a great deal of damage to the Plan and the Security Shields."

"Oh, sir," Franz said. "Thank you!"

"Schaeffer is very fond of you, isn't he, young Franz?" the general asked.

"Yes, sir!" young Franz replied. "He won't be at all suspicious of you."

"I'm sure he won't be, sir. He has even said he—loved me." Franz smiled with embarrassment.

"We had hoped for that. Schaeffer's an old and a lonely man."

A buzzer sounded and an SG Lieutenant entered.

"This is Lieutenant Myerfing," Kerf said. "Lieutenant, I want you to meet our prize pupil, young Franz Schaeffer."

Myerfing coughed. "Sir, there seems to be some disagreement in the Council about Schaeffer."

The general stared at him impatiently. "What sort of disagreement? This is hardly a time to review a carefully weighed decision."

"The old sentiments regarding Schaeffer are rising again among the Senior Council Members, sir. They all agree that the Omega Calculator is of supreme importance to the maintenance of the Plan. They agree that only the Calculator with its unerring electrons could have moulded an orderly, well-tooled society from the pulp of the masses. But they say the Omega is still a very complex calculator, and that Schaeffer is the only one who can care for it properly."

He paused, then added quickly, "Also Schaeffer is much older than any of us can remember. He grew up with the Omega. He practically built it himself. I'm afraid that some of the older members tend

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to respect Schaeffer at least as much as they do the Calculator, sir."

"A common trap for incipient sentimentality," Kerf said.

Franz had studied the Code books religiously. He had some idea of what they were talking about and now he was frightened. Talking about the glorious Omega so candidly seemed sinful. The Omega kept everything running smoothly and rightly, and nothing could ever change for the worst as long as the Omega ruled. Being a machine, it couldn't change at all.

Franz could quote the Code books backward and forward.

"Sir," Lieutenant Myerfing continued, "the dissenters sympathize with your plan. But they insist on preparing for another overseer before brain-washing Schaeffer. They agree that Schaeffer is no longer reliable, that he has mystic tendencies that must be extirpated. But they insist also that another overseer be ready—"

General Kerf pressed a button. A little man with short bowed legs, a fat face and deep-pocketed eyes came in, and stood at shabby attention. "I anticipated that," Kerf said to Myerfing.

Franz felt only contempt for the slovenly civilian, even though the man was qualified and wore the identity band of a scientist on his left sleeve. Scientists were under the control of the SG, and it had been a long time now since any of them had voiced "free-thought" protests.

Franz knew that unguarded scientists had a strong tendency to drift toward mysticism, and were in general crackpots who had to be kept in their channelized work, and never allowed to poke their noses out of it.

But Scientists *were* useful. They kept the machines running and their specialties always depended on brain-work. Yet they had to be constantly watched and controlled. And you had to be careful about brain-washing them, for they were trouble-makers even under the best of circumstances.

Schaeffer included, Franz thought. *My old mushy guardian.*

According to the Code Book, a scientist was really just a kind of useful chemical, a catalyst, to fuse the efficiency of machines and the often fallible goals of men.

"This," General Kerf said, "is Scientist Senior Grade Chardexe."

The little man bowed jerkily forward.

Kerf said. "As Chief Cybernetic-ist for the Institute of Socio-Engineers, Chardexe has studied the Omega Calculator for thirty-seven years. He has retraced the complex diagrams and records of its construction. Take my word to the Council for this, Lieutenant, Chardexe can competently, even brilliantly oversee the Omega's continued function, including the maintenance of the Memory Racks."

"Well," Myerfing said. "That is good news—a distinct relief, sir! It should satisfy the Council and clear the way for Franz's assign-

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ment. Up to now it had been assumed that no one but Schaeffer—"

"Assumed incorrectly," General Kerf rasped. "Scientist Chardexe, you may go."

The scientist bowed, and walked out, his head still inclined. Myerfing fidgeted. "Wasn't a man named Chardexe suspected of some kind of aberration? I'm sure that name's familiar in connection with—"

"Not mystic tendencies," Kerf said quickly. "I can assure you of that."

"But there was *something*—"

"A Scientist can be aberrated in certain areas and still function properly in a specialized field. Take my word for it. Chardexe can handle the Omega Calculator."

Franz was becoming impatient again. He wanted to get started on Schaeffer.

"Anyway," General Kerf said, "no man is a threat to the Omega. I'm convinced now that the Omega has reached a point where it is practically self-sufficient, within limits of course. What must be guarded against is a dangerous tendency to identify the overseer with the Omega."

True, true, thought young Franz. The Overseer was only a man, while the Omega was a machine. The glorious synthesizer—the hard steely core that ruled and held rigid the malleable pulp of the stupid mass mind. It was all in the Code Books.

Schaeffer was just a human tool which SG used to build the machines, and keep them running. It was the Omega that did the real figuring, always dependable, leaving nothing to chance. A man was expendable.

The Code Books made it all very clear.

"Young Franz," General Kerf said. "Tomorrow you'll spend your regular weekend visit with your Guardian, Schaeffer. You will transmit to us at once any evidence of mystical tendencies you may observe in Schaeffer. You will wait five minutes. If in that time you haven't received any signal from us, then under Public Law Fourteen, you will narcotize Schaeffer. Then you will brain-wash him. Thoroughly, young Franz. Do you understand?"

Franz felt like falling down on the floor, he was so weak. "I—I'll get a shock box?"

"Of course," Kerf smiled as he spoke. "We don't know how much Schaeffer may suspect. We don't know what preparations he may have made against being discovered. A few minutes may make all the difference. Don't forget. He's in the most dangerous imaginable position! He's inside the Omega!"

"Yes, sir," Franz whispered.

General Kerf pressed a button on his desk, and spoke into the intercom. "Young Franz Schaeffer will be in there immediately. You will give him a brain-washing field kit."

Salutes were exchanged, heels

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clicked, and Franz turned to depart. But at the door something pulled him back around slowly.

"Something else, young Franz?"

The thing, the presence in the night. The shadow that dissolved when he stared at it, or walked toward it. The feeling of something waiting outside his window when the lights went out. The scraping and the whispering noises under the floor and the fear of trying to fall asleep. The dreadful dreams.

But if he confessed now he'd miss his great assignment. They might even put him under a prober. He felt small all at once, horribly alone. Afraid there all by himself, and little. Everything suddenly seemed like some mushy sick dream he couldn't even remember without becoming almost physically ill.

Get out, Franz! Once you're away from General Kerf you'll know what to do!

Once out of the office he could think about it and decide. No, his duty was plain. He knew that the Code Books defined his duty clearly. It was just a matter of making the decision to confess. You did what was right for the Omega and the Plan, without flinching or attempting to save yourself.

All at once a sudden, fierce determination sealed his lips. He could lick those dreams himself. He was an Investigator now. He would just refuse to dream any more, and then there would be nothing to confess.

He would do it alone. He was going to spy on his Guardian—probe out Schaeffer.

He was going to be a hero.

The brain-washing kit was disguised as a toy, a colorful little box full of geometric blocks. Franz kept the box open beside him as he waited for his Guardian to come in.

Other tools for spying, recording and collecting evidence were included in his belongings. There was a toilet kit, a play-kit, constructive building blocks and an electron-toy set.

He was uncomfortable though. His skin was sticky, and he kept shifting around. There was always something scary about these weekend visits with his Guardian. They occurred deep, deep inside the Selectron Center of the Giant Computor—the very heart of the Omega—and once inside you could not tell where you were.

Only Schaeffer could tell.

The Omega covered a big expanse of the Control Level, the center of the City. It was ten tiers high and Franz was chillingly aware that he'd have trouble getting out if Schaeffer became suspicious and decided to trap him like some experimental laboratory animal imprisoned in a maze.

Schaeffer knew the Omega as no one else did. Franz somehow didn't trust this Chardexe either for only Schaeffer and the Omega had grown up together, and seemed

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mysteriously linked in thought and purpose.

"Ah, my dear little Franz," the old man whispered as he came in, "I'm so glad to see you again." He put his arms around Franz, and hugged him close. "I've missed you, lad. It's lonelier here than you'll ever know."

Franz moved out of the old man's arms, and sprawled out on the couch. Then dutifully, doing what he was supposed to do, he kissed his Guardian on both cheeks, and fell back laughing on the couch again.

"You mean so much to me, Franz. I'm all alone here now, with only the old ghosts of dead years and a few old faces to keep me sane."

"I love you too," Franz said quickly. *Easy,* he thought. *Take your time, Franz, and catch him when he's off guard.*

Schaeffer moved close to Franz, and peered intently into his face. His eyes were moist as though he had been crying. Most of the time he looked like a big, wrinkled-up baby. But when he saw Franz on weekends his face took on color and life and joy. His body was so old, Franz thought that it made a person sick just to look at him. Through his transparent skin you could almost see the bones and nerves, everything worn shiny with time.

"Let me look at you, Franz! Ah, now there's life in the old Omega."

Franz turned his face slightly away. The old man's eyes were scary. They were alive, and looking at them Franz got the feeling he was staring through mysterious windows into some other time. The past maybe. The old man was always talking about the past.

"I'm so glad I'm your Guardian, Franz," Schaeffer whispered. "I've looked forward all week to your coming."

"I like it here too," Franz said. "It's a real honor, having you for my Guardian."

"I've been fixing up another room for you, Franz—a room with all kinds of wonderful things in it, just for you. It's right in the Selectron Sector of the Omega. I have to spend a lot of time in the Selectron Sector now. The Memory Racks take up most of my time because they're wearing out." The old man shook his head. "We need fifty trained scientists here. Not just one."

Franz had always played the role of inquisitive youth well. Now he played it even better. He took pride in it, and his enthusiasm carried conviction. The old man's eyes began to shine.

Franz asked more questions about the Omega. He queried his Guardian about the giant vacuum tubes, the voltage amplifiers, the input frequencies, and the electromotive forces. Even why the phosphor-coated storage surfaces gave off blue light, and the memory cells functioned best with the aid of a compensator.

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Actually Franz understood little or none of it, and he was proud of not understanding. Only crackpot scientists understood stuff like that. They were useful but they were also sickeningly dull.

Franz was being very curious. He decided suddenly to use the pretender trick. He'd pretend to be what he suspected his guardian of being, draw him out, and slyly trick a confession of him.

Franz said, "What would happen if you injected a dream into the Omega?"

"What? What did you say, my boy?" For an instant the old man looked merely startled. Then his eyes almost closed, and a frown moved in tiny lines across his face.

"A dream," Franz repeated. "Say you had a dream. You put it into the Omega for the Calculator to figure out. The Omega can figure anything out, can't it?"

Schaeffer said with slow care, "An unusual question, even for an inquisitive boy." He stared at Franz. Then an eager light came into his face.

"A very interesting question, young Franz," he reiterated.

"Well, say I had a dream," Franz said innocently. Then he hesitated. "Oh, I know you're not supposed to dream. Dreams are bad. But it was such a little dream—only one. I wondered what it meant."

It was a sly idea, Franz thought, and it was scary. But he was sure the SG would think he was lying, solely to trick information out of Schaeffer. They wouldn't know he was speaking the truth. And Franz might be able to figure out exactly what his dream meant and get rid of it, and never have to confess or anything.

Schaeffer said. "Well, Franz. Dreams aren't supposed to mean anything. They're irrational, according to the Codes. A dream is just supposed to be something left over from a former, savage age. An emotional and sentimental vestige, so to speak. A dream is a ghost."

"I know they're not *supposed* to mean anything," Franz said. "But mine scare me."

Schaeffer put his arm around Franz's shoulder, and he said softly, "What was this dream precisely? You can tell me, but no one else, Franz. Will you remember that, if we talk about it?"

"Promise *you* won't tell?" Franz said, nodding.

"No," Schaeffer smiled sadly. "I won't tell. As you said, one little dream. What harm could it do?"

Franz grinned. The evidence against Schaeffer was already going into the transformer, and straight to the SG labs. The recording mill was grinding.

"Well," Franz said. "I had this dream about someone coming up to my bed during the night. It must have been a woman. She felt warm, and soft and I wanted her to sit with me and hug me and tell me stories. And she said to me: 'Jack darling, wake up. You're going to climb the beanstalk.'"

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Even though pretending, Franz felt embarrassed talking such mush. There was something scary in it too. Deep inside he almost felt the fear again. He jerked around, but there wasn't even a shadow in the corner of the room.

Schaeffer closed his eyes. "Jack and the Beanstalk," he whispered slowly. "Kids used to read fairy tales. A free and wonderful imagination enriched their lives even after they were grown up. Everything good in the world came from that ability to imagine boldly, Franz. The Omega came from someone's daring dreams too."

Franz felt something cold trembling in his clasp. His hand shook as he pressed the activator on the plastic toy box. Inaudibly, the brain-washing kit began warming up. In less than a minute, he knew, a thin beam of sonic power would build up to be released by pressure on the tiny stud.

"So," Franz whispered, "you think dreams are good then?"

Franz moved the kit around, looking steadily at Schaeffer. Schaeffer saw and understood the look. His eyes widened in a kind of watery horror. He stared down at the toy box, and then quickly back to Franz's face.

"You, my boy? *You too?*"

Schaeffer started backing away. Franz followed. He took the small narcotizing capsule out of his pocket and got ready to hurl it at his Guardian.

The old man stumbled and blinked his eyes. His head shook slowly back and forth, with a sort of bewildered wobbling. "Sometimes I forget what they've come to outside—the degradation, the savage cruelty."

"You're going to forget a lot more in just a second," Franz said. "You won't even know who you are, I bet." He raised his hand to throw the capsule. Schaeffer turned and ran toward the door. Franz got there first. Schaeffer hurried along the wall, falling over a chair and crying out despairfully. He started crawling into a corner.

Franz went toward him, his lips tight.

Schaeffer saw the hate in his eyes and whispered: "It's the venom of loneliness, Franz. It's the cruel hate of unexpressed dreams and the vitriol of unplayed games. It's the anguish of warm arms never felt, of good night kisses never given. The acid of a childhood you've never been given a chance to live."

"Shut up, you old crackpot!" Franz said.

"Please, my boy. Don't do what you were sent here to do. Listen to me instead. I'll make you understand—all that childhood can and should mean. They'll never find us. I know the Omega as I know every vein in these old hands."

"Shut up!" Franz screamed. "You're a crazy old crackpot!"

Schaeffer ran behind a cabinet.

"Come out!" Franz yelled. "You can't escape."

Franz tiptoed toward the cabinet.

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He could see one of Schaeffer's thin transparent hands creeping desperately around the corner.

"Franz! Wait! I have more to say!"

"Shut up! You said dreams were good! You're going to get washed out!"

"Franz, listen. You can still dream. Stay here and hide with me for a while. I could help you to get away, to escape from the City. You must hide, run—do anything to get away while you can still dream!"

Franz flung his weight against the cabinet. Behind it, Schaeffer moaned. Then the old man stumbled out, and leaned against the wall. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth, ran out of his nose. He was coughing as he fell backward over a chair. He lay motionless for an instant, then wearily he turned over. His body seemed to spread out over the floor. Sadly he looked up at Franz, his eyes suddenly fearless. Franz hated him all the more.

Franz kicked out, kept kicking and screaming. But the old man didn't seem to care. He just lay there looking sadly up at Franz out of those crackpot eyes. Old windows, scary windows—opening into somewhere else, some other time.

"Franz, let me answer your question. If you put a dream into the Omega nothing would happen. The Omega cannot dream. It couldn't even absorb the data of a dream. Only a man can dream. Children—little children—they can dream most of all. You have to preserve—have to keep—"

Franz threw the capsule. The gas seeped and clung to the old man's body. Schaeffer twisted and choked and flung his arms about. Finally he stopped struggling. Only his lips continued to move heavily while his large, sad eyes remained fastened on Franz.

"Franz, don't let it die," he pleaded. "Don't bury your dreams. The Omega cannot see the things that we cannot see. But we know they're there. The Omega does not know—"

"You shut up!" Franz screamed. He jumped up and down. "You're a crazy mystic!"

"Franz—my boy—"

Franz dropped down, leveling the sights of the brain-washer. With a gentle whirring sound the tiny needle sliced into Schaeffer's right temple, its high-frequency vibrations dissolving bone, fusing tissue and short-circuiting cells. It cut on remorselessly, emerging finally through Schaeffer's left temple.

Schaeffer stopped gibbering. After a few minutes he moved a little, and then sat up. He stared vacantly at Franz.

Franz stood up, and motioned sharply. "On your feet, crackpot! On your feet and come along!"

The old man stumbled forward, breathing heavily. Pink moisture hung from his lips and he wobbled on his feet. "Where—were are we

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going?" he muttered. His head bobbed on his thin neck like a bird's and he kept blinking his eyes at the light.

"Just come along!"

The old man shuffled after the boy. He looked around once as though wondering where he was, like someone waking up in the middle of a dream.

Franz's locker radiated the power of his neatly folded uniform as he lay supine in his dusk-shadowed room and waited for the coming of night. General Kerf had highly commended him, and given him an oak leaf to hang under his badge.

Tonight, he thought, *I've got to go right to sleep. I can't be alone and afraid after getting that oak leaf.*

The corners. That was where the thing usually concealed itself. The corners—and the whispering night at the window. The voices and the faces that just weren't ever quite real. The dreams were unreal but they came just the same, and you tried to forget them when you woke up because they were sins. The stupid kid's games. The make-believe. The hidden books, the imaginative creatures. The gods, angels, ogres, the saints, devils, elves, dwarves and pixies in the gardens. The giants in the sky.

"Jack. Jack, darling. Wake up. You're going to climb the beanstalk."

Jack the Giant Killer.

He remembered the warmth, and a gently smiling face. Tender arms reaching out. Sweet warmth and consoling arms to beguile him to happy sleep.

"Once upon a time—"

"Long, long ago—"

Franz woke up. He pushed himself back into a corner of the bed, and stared at the window, at the gray dawn light moving in over the metal walls.

It was so still in the room, with only the gray light rippling silently toward him that he began to sob.

Then he heard the knock, the direct and familiar knock.

"Come in," he sobbed.

The door opened, and Marie appeared, framed in a glimmering square of radiance.

She moved toward his bed, her bright blond braids bobbing in the light, her wide blue eyes sympathetic, filled with a child-like wonderment at his broken sobs. She dropped her toys on the bed.

Franz managed to stop crying for just a minute. He felt on the defensive, but for some reason, he hardly cared now. She sat close to him and he could feel the warmth of her. He could smell the sweet clean warmth of her bright blond hair, and feel the softness of her hand on his wet forehead.

He closed his eyes, sinking down and surrendering himself completely to the sweet solace of her nearness. The sobs came out flooding full and clean without fear.

"I heard you crying," Marie said,

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hardly above a whisper. "I bet you were having a bad dream."

"No," he said. "It was a good dream. Now I remember, Marie. It was good . . ."

"A good *dream?*"

"Yes, Marie. I remember her now. My mother . . . She—she brought me a book. It had been hidden away. It was full of fairy stories. 'I'll read to you,' she said to me. 'I'll take a chance, darling. You're only a little boy and you need these stories. You'll need them in your mind—to keep forever.' I never saw her any more after that. But she's still alive. She still loves me, Marie. She comes back at nights—to read and talk to me."

"What was it she read?" Marie said.

"Jack and the Beanstalk."

He felt the gray aloneness. Something very old, and beyond the reach even of fear. His eyes opened. First he saw only Marie's wide blue eyes. Then he saw the lid on the toy box snap open. He recognized the familiar sound, the humming sound.

"I knew all along you were just a crazy little risk," she said.

Only seven, he thought. He started to scream. He felt old, he felt as old as old Schaeffer just before the beam hit his temple.

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the big jump

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

He was quite the most important man in all of human history. If only he hadn't crossed himself up so terrifyingly everywhere.

JARVIS PULLED OUT his meerschaum pipe and pointed it at me. "Remember, Degan, you're on your own from now on. If you get into trouble, we can't help you." He said it as if the matter were settled.

I stared at him incredulously. "You can't expect me to go hunting through all the millennia for Leinwand. Surely you're not actually suggesting—"

He cut me off with a preemptory wave of his hand. "We have only one time-cycle—and you're our best man," he said. "It's up to you to find him."

"But that's impossible!" I protested.

"Nothing is impossible, my boy." His hands were trembling as he lighted the pipe. "You know that's the slogan of the North American Intelligence Service. A thousand years will pass like an hour. In fact, on the time-cycle, it *will* be an hour."

"But—"

"And, remember, we always get our man. Bring back Leinwand, Degan. The safety of our universe depends on you."

Time travel can use merriment and here's a story that's shaken by great, magical gusts of it. We've doffed our four-dimensional hats many times to the ladies in these pages — for their first-story originality, their warmth and lyricism and sprightly humor. Evelyn Smith has a prose style impeccably artful, and an added story-telling assurance that makes her traffic in hilarity an incitement to favoritism, and — completely a joy.

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Strictly corn! Yet he was nervous—I could see that. I suppose it is easier to sit behind a desk and order someone to accomplish the impossible than to try it yourself. But the waiting probably isn't much fun.

I still couldn't figure the whole thing out, though. Why was the commissioner asking me more or less to commit suicide for the sake of one wretched murderer? I suspected he'd been buttering me up because I'd known Leinwand. But I *was* the Department's best man, and Jarvis had nothing special against me . . . to the best of my knowledge anyway. I'd never been one of his official pets, but I'd never rubbed him the wrong way really hard either. Why did he have it in for me?

"Why can't you let Leinwand stay wherever he is?" I asked. "Okay, so he's a criminal—a murderer. But, just between us, you know as well as I do that murderers go scot free every day. The department isn't a hundred per cent efficient. It never has been, and it can't be."

Jarvis puffed at his pipe without replying. The luxurious aroma of Venutian *ntpash* lapped tantalizingly at my nostrils. I'd smoked it just once in my life—a girl I knew had given me a couple of hectos on a birthday. You had to make a commissioner's salary to afford to smoke it as a regular thing—and to risk valuable men on exercises in futility.

"He isn't worth hunting the past and future for!" I snapped. "Especially since one man couldn't possibly find him. If you had thousands of cops mounted on time-cycles maybe, just maybe, it could be done. But not one guy, no matter how good—and I'm not that good."

The chief actually lifted himself out of his chair—and that takes some doing, because he's a big fellow—to pat me on the shoulder. I just stood there without moving, looking straight at him.

"Don't underestimate yourself, my boy," he said. He gave me that wide politician's smile, but I was damned if I would smile back. "Sure we would like to use a whole corps of mounted time-police, but we just don't happen to possess a corps. We've tried to reconstruct the time-cycle from the Department's model, but it was no good. We need the plans stored in the time-machine itself to work from."

"A fine staff of engineers we have," I growled.

I said it just for the sake of arguing, because I'd heard about Remsen and his fabulous work that even Leinwand himself—and Leinwand had been Remsen's assistant—couldn't completely understand. What had always burned him up was the fact that fame and fortune were going to a man who, with the finished machinery there before him, still couldn't figure out just how his invention worked. And Remsen was a pretty smart cookie

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too—not as smart as he thought he was, of course; but then who is?

Jarvis shrugged. Let's keep to the central problem. Remsen's dead and his killer got away with the machine. We wouldn't even have the time-cycle—it was supposed to go in the big machine itself, like a lifeboat, you know—only we found out what had happened sooner than he figured on, and he had to make a quick getaway."

Now I saw what all the fuss was about. I might have known. "So that's what you're after, the secret of the time-machine? You don't really care how many times Leinwand has killed—or whom he's killed, or is going to kill."

The commissioner didn't get mad. That bothered me, because ordinarily he would have blown his top. He just leaned one thick hip on the smooth plastitip of the desk and sighed.

"You're right. His criminal viciousness in the present doesn't bother us too much on a realistic level. As you pointed out, murderers have gone scot free before and it's uneconomic to pursue one criminal at a price that could prevent us from catching a dozen others. And Remsen's dead. Why should I risk the life of another good man if that were all there was to it?"

He pulled at his dark mustache. "But the man or woman he's *going* to kill . . . yes. That matters. Think of what Leinwand might do in the past in other way's to alter the present. He might bring back from the future some technology that could ruin us. Not just us personally, but the whole of our civilization."

Jarvis stopped smiling and suddenly I noticed how old and tired he looked. The heartiness ebbed out of him. "He's got us in a corner, Bill," he said flatly. "Probably there's nothing we can do about it. If he wants to destroy us, he damn well can. But we might as well go down fighting—and this is our last, our only chance."

"I see, sir," I said, feeling like a heel, and bitterly reproaching myself for failing to figure the whole thing out myself, especially since I'd known Leinwand and what he was capable of. "Okay," I said. "I'll have a shot at it. I might as well. From what you say, things may go *pfft* any minute. It wouldn't matter much where I was when it happened, would it?"

Unless I was safely holed up in the remote past, I couldn't help thinking. And I was ashamed of myself almost instantly, because that was the way a guy like Leinwand would think—not a guy like me.

"I'm glad you understand," the chief said wearily. "Maybe I should have given it to you straight right at the start. But—well, I suppose I didn't like to admit the whole thing, even to myself."

I nodded. There was nothing much I could say.

"I suppose you're wondering

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why I didn't call Ottawa," he said suddenly. "But it happened in this sector and I didn't think Ottawa had a better man to send out than you, Bill."

We shook hands. It was only later that I remembered that the capital police would hardly be likely to have a detective who had known Leinwand, and could recognize him.

"Try to change history as little as possible, Degan," Jarvis advised me. "If you should injure someone by accident you might cause as much mischief as Leinwand. I hope I'll see you again, my boy—soon."

"It's May 25, 2583," I said, consulting the calendar and my chronograph, in that order. "One o'clock in the afternoon." I saluted. "I'll be back by two, sir—or I won't be back at all."

That had been a pretty silly thing to say, I realized as soon as I got on the machine, because the controls weren't the pushbutton type. You had to set pointers to get what you wanted, and the pointers were big, clumsy things while the figures on the dials were small and crowded together. I had enough trouble getting the year right, let alone the day and hour. It would be pretty cute if I turned up at my own wake—although maybe I was a little optimistic in thinking I would ever get back.

I decided to try the more recent centuries first. Since Leinwand was no historian, he was likely to seek out an age where he could be reasonably sure of remaining inconspicuous. So I set the controls for June 25, 2480. I didn't feel I needed to change my uniform because Leinwand knew me, and to the citizens of the past, civvies would be more apt to look like a fancy dress costume than any official uniform I might select. My own was severely simple in texture and cut.

The trip wasn't instantaneous, and it wasn't pleasant. The big machine might not have been so bad, but the little one bucked like one of those animals in the old mediaeval vidtapes they still show occasionally. You know, the kind people sit on—for a while anyway.

I've never been a good traveler, and I was pretty sick in the fifteen minutes it took me to go back a hundred years. And then, to top it all, when the machine finally stopped and my surroundings shimmered into view, it turned out to be snowing. Snowing—in June!

Obviously the weather couldn't have changed so much in one century. I must have set the controls a couple of months off—or maybe the dials weren't accurate. I would not have been a bit surprised to find out that Leinwand had been the one to calibrate them. A brilliant guy, but careless as hell. I gave the thing a vicious kick as I got off, and got a gust of snow full in my face.

As it happened, it was a lucky thing for me I'd hit a bad winter's day. The commissioner and I had

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figured that the best place for me and the cycle to materialize would be in Central Park. That's a sort of public square in the old Manhattan Quarter. The Manhattan Quarter's the oldest part of the sector and the park had existed as long as the quarter had. Before then it had been forest, so it seemed like a pretty fair choice.

It was almost noon when I started out. I was cold and wet and miserable and I cursed Jarvis and the weather and Leinwand and Remsen and the whole bloody twenty-fifth century as I trundled my time-cycle along the paths. Just to make things even more difficult, it operated only in the fourth dimension. Along the third it was just a lot of scrap metal on wheels.

Then I thought of something. Leinwand too would be stuck spatially. Unless he'd taken along a hell of a lot of money for each era—or had known in advance what era he'd make for—he would not be able to afford horizontal or vertical transportation. Of course the time-machine itself was a great big thing and could hold a considerable amount of cubic footage . . .

But—wait a minute—Leinwand certainly couldn't transport that hundred-ton gadget for any distance unobtrusively; and he as certainly wouldn't want to go far from it. He could never feel secure—it just wasn't in him—so he'd always have to be ready for a quick getaway.

Okay, so I had a clue of sorts. Chances were Leinwand would stay in the New York Sector. He'd figure he'd have enough coverage in time, so he wouldn't need to worry about space. And probably he'd be right. But at least it gave me something tangible to get my teeth into. I knew where his house was located. I'd been there lots of times when we'd both been kids.

I pulled the brim of my hat over my face to shield it from the snow and dragged the machine out into the street. The name was the same—Fifth Avenue—and the old tenements were the same, a little less ramshackle than in my day, maybe, but still a disgrace to the sector.

"You looking for a garage, son?" a middle-aged man asked, stopping and opening the flap of his transparent weather suit to talk. "Pretty foul day to be walking around shoving that dingus."

I could see through the plastifilm that he was wearing a tunic and breeches not too much different from mine, although more subdued in color. So the only thing that really made me look funny was my lack of an overcoat, and that I could talk my way out of.

"A garage wouldn't help me," I explained. "This contraption comes from Pluto and it runs on the local fuel. I just found that out when it stranded me smack in the middle of the park? Didn't think of asking when I bought it from one of the natives. Looks to me like I've been gypped by those crooks."

"Pluto?" the man said in sur-

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prise. "Didn't know we'd got that far out in space yet."

I could have sworn Pluto had been reached by 2472. Either they'd been kidding me in school or this guy didn't keep up with the news. However, I couldn't afford to take any chances.

"Expedition just got back this morning," I explained. "Been kept under wraps. Security reasons." I shivered and stamped my feet. "Hell of a season to get back too. I thought it would be spring by now—daffodils and stuff crawling all over the place. You lose track of the months way out in space. Years too, I guess, if you get far enough out."

"It's January—January 2451." He smiled. "I shouldn't think you'd forget a date like this. I know I won't. Nice to be able to tell my grandchildren that's the day I spoke to the man who made the first contact with intelligent alien life."

"Well, there were a lot of us, really," I said, with suitable modesty. "I wasn't the only one."

I was pretty much annoyed—2451, and I'd set the controls for 2480. Even if I succeeded in finding Leinwand, how would I be able to bring him back if I couldn't fine down the controls of the machine within thirty years? A beautiful thing if I brought him back before he committed any crime; they might put *me* in jail.

And then I did a double take. "Intelligent alien life!" Of course the guy had figured that by "native of Pluto" I'd meant an extraterrestrial; how could there be people if I'd gone on the very first expedition? But naturally I had been thinking of the natives who lived there in my day. Pluto'd been colonized around the turn of the century by, judging from their descendants, a bunch of crooks.

There was no intelligent life in the whole of our Solar System except humanity—if you could call humanity intelligent, taking me as a representative example. What Jarvis had really needed was a historian, not a detective.

Oh, well, when this guy found out that Pluto hadn't been reached yet, he'd think I was just a crackpot. That's one thing you'll find in any century. So I hadn't changed history any so far.

"Can you tell me how to get out to the Long Island Quarter?" I asked. "I'm really a Chicago Sector man myself."

He looked doubtful. "Well, you could take a helicab, but I don't think your contraption would fit into it. Maybe you could leave it somewhere in this quarter until . . . ?"

I shook my head. "My uncle's got a big place out on the Island," I improvised, "and I want to stash the thing there. It's impractical to run, but too good to throw away—I'd hate to tell you how many credits worth of junk I had to trade for it. Maybe a museum would be interested . . . Do you think I

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could hire a helivan in a hurry on such short notice?"

"Well, ordinarily you couldn't, but it so happens my son is a heli-trucker. I'll beam him right away; he'll be glad to do it for you."

"I'll have to give him a check," I said warily. "I'm a little short of cash at the moment."

I was pretty sure the Chase National Bank dated back at least to the Atomic Wars, so the check should look good. But when the guy presented it, the tellers would not realize it was a perfectly good one—just post-dated a hundred and thirty-two years—they'd just think he'd been victimized.

Which, of course, he would have been if he'd accepted the check . . . only neither he nor his father would.

"After all, you weren't exploring Pluto for yourself," the old man told me, "but for humanity. And, as part of humanity, I'd like to show my appreciation in a small way."

I felt more of a louse than if he'd taken the check.

They got me out to the North Shore where the old Leinwand place was. The neighborhood was not good, but it was respectable, and the house didn't look as shabby as it had when I'd last seen it. When the Leinwands first ran the place up—back around the Atomic Period—it had been a regular mansion, I'd been told. They'd had dough then.

But, though they'd been broke for at least three hundred years, Leinwand could never seem to get used to it. The family had their traditions and he always figured that somehow, somewhere there was money coming to him. And it must have been the last straw when Remsen took his ideas for a time-machine that wouldn't work and turned them into one that did.

Of course the whole job was Remsen's and he paid Leinwand for his time, but—oh, I don't know—maybe he should have given the guy some credit.

Anyhow, the trucker and his father told me good-bye and asked me to come have dinner with them some time. I said I would and I'd beam them—no use tying myself down to a date I couldn't keep even if I wanted to.

I dragged the machine into the front yard of the Leinwand place. A long time before it had been a garden but now it was just a yard. I rang the antique doorbell.

A woman answered the door instead of a robot. I think people must have already had robots by then but Leinwand's family would not be able to afford things like that until they were mass produced. The woman was a girl, really—a cute enough blonde—but she looked somehow familiar and that bothered me. How would I be able to recognize a girl born a hundred and twenty years ahead of me?

I figured the quickest way to accomplish my mission was to ask the question straight: "Is Alec

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Leinwand here, ma'am?" I asked, pulling off my hat.

She looked at me. I couldn't quite figure out the expression on her face. "My husband's name is Leinwand," she said, smiling finally, "but it's Martin not Alec. And he isn't home anyway."

Then I knew who she was. It was pretty creepy too. Leinwand's only a couple of years older than I am—thirty-five or so—and here was this dish—twenty-two or maybe twenty-three—his great-great-great grandmother.

I felt a little sick and anxious to get away. "Has a very large machine suddenly appeared in the vicinity?" I asked, practically snapping at her, though it was hardly her fault she was an ancestor.

"A large machine?" Suddenly she began to laugh.

"Aha," I thought, "there's a streak of insanity in the family. That accounts for Leinwand; I always thought it couldn't be environment alone because, after all, he was brought up with me."

"No," she said, giggling. "Only your small machine, honestly . . . I—I swear it. G-good-bye."

The door slammed but behind it I could hear her still laughing. I am not accustomed to having girls laugh at me—smile, yes; laugh, no. But she must have been telling the truth; a big thing like the time-machine would have left some signs, and there weren't any. The snow was the wet kind that melted before reaching the ground and the hard-packed earth all around the house was unmarked.

Since there was nobody in sight, I decided the yard was as good a place as any to take my departure from. Then I noticed Mrs. Leinwand was watching me from behind the curtains, and in back of her was a face that was also somehow familiar, but I couldn't identify it.

It wasn't Leinwand. He's a dark character with a face like a depraved marmoset's and this was a blond, good-looking guy. Both of them were laughing. I was so mad I disappeared right in front of them. Let them try to figure it out.

My next stop was aimed at 2351, and this time I got it pretty close—2348. It was another female ancestor of Leinwand's who told me what the year was, almost without my having to ask. This one was a redhead and I couldn't understand how Leinwand turned out to be such a funny-looking character with all those lookers on the female side of his family. The Leinwands themselves must have been a pretty creepy set.

I say must have been because somehow my contacts all seemed to be with the distaff side—I never set eyes on a male Leinwand. Since I generally hit the place in the middle of the day, I'd have figured the boy Leinwands were always at work, but I knew that Leinwands didn't work steady at anything except feeling sorry for themselves.

Anyhow, the rehead had a visitor

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in the house too—a man, by the sound of his laugh. And it was a familiar laugh, but not Leinwand's. Alec had always kind of sniggered and this guy had a real hearty haha. I was itching to get a look at him, but he wouldn't come out of the house and she wouldn't let me in. So he couldn't have been her husband. Not that I'd really thought he was.

The brunette in April 2260 also denied having seen the time-machine, but she acted even less surprised than the others to see me, so I gave the place a really thorough going-over. Not the house, of course, because she wouldn't let me in either, and I had no authority in that century to force an entrance. The time-machine wouldn't have fitted in the house though, so it didn't matter.

I searched the grounds very carefully. Back that far they were landscaped with crocuses and things shooting out all over to make my job even more complicated. The house was in fair condition too; somebody had even thought to slap on a coat of paint. I figured this was the past where the Leinwands still had some dough, where the traditions started. They wouldn't let down a member of the family, even if he came from the future with a price on his head. I went over each bush and shrub with my magnifier. The brunette watched me, giggling.

"Sherlock Holmes," she said.

If she hadn't been a woman, I'd have slugged her. I never liked dark hair anyway.

As I straddled the time-cycle, I caught a glimpse of the brunette's boyfriend through a window. He jumped back when he caught my eye, so I couldn't get a good look at him. But he looked a hell of a lot like the blonde's fellow. Which was impossible—they were two hundred years apart.

By then I was pretty sick of Leinwand's pretty forebears, so I figured maybe I'd make a big hop way back to prehistoric times. No people then to confuse the issue, so it'd be a cinch to spot any evidence of the time-machine's having arrived. Then, after a breathing spell—and I was entitled to one week's vacation in three hundred years—I could work my way forward. Be a change of pace anyway.

But, as I started to press the controls for the long jump, the air beside me suddenly shimmered and another time-cycle appeared beside mine. And the fellow on it was wearing the broad-brimmed hat and red tunic of the NAIS, just like me.

Jarvis had double-crossed me! He'd probably sent out a whole fleet of cops on time-cycles, telling each guy he was the one and only.

Then I stared at the other man. He was a big fellow with close-cropped blond hair and narrow blue eyes and he looked familiar, even though I was sure I'd never seen him in the department before.

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He might have been an Ottawa man, but how would a provincial cop like me recognize one of the capital boys?

He grinned. "Always a little slow on the uptake, weren't you, Bill?"

Then I realized who he was. He was me. I must have—or must be about to—hit the same time twice. Thinking about it made me dizzy, so I stopped.

"This is the third time I tried to catch you before you started," he said. "The first time I got here just after you'd gone, and the second time I didn't think to move the cycle first and I materialized inside you. We coalesced."

"Oh," I said. "Well, it was nice of you to drop in on me—er—Bill."

"This isn't just a social visit," he explained. "I just wanted to save you some trouble. Don't bother with the Mezozoic period and the epochs before that. I've cased them already and there's no sign of the machine. It would have been impossible to hide any traces, too. Virgin forests and stuff, you know."

"Thanks, Bill," I said.

"And, if you decide not to take my advice and go anyway," he said smiling to himself as if he knew I had a suspicious nature, "at least give the Triassic a miss. Very nasty-looking dinosaur hanging around these parts then."

"Good of you to warn me," I told him.

"I wouldn't have done it for anybody but myself," he said. "Well, so long, Bill."

"Wait a minute!" I yelled as he was about to buzz off. "Since there's two of us now, let's get a little system into this search. Why don't you concentrate on the future and I'll take the past."

"That's a fine idea," he said. "I'm glad I thought of it."

We waved at each other and disappeared in different directions.

In 2152, a thirtyish and homely Mrs. Leinwand, for a change, took a broom to me. "Thought I told you to get out and stay out!" she snapped.

"I guess Bill[2] didn't devote himself solely to the prehistoric periods," I deduced as I dematerialized.

It was the summer of 2049 when I met myself again in the Leinwand yard. "Ha," said the other Bill to me, "I knew I'd been here before. This is the brownette, isn't it? There were so many, I can't keep track."

"I thought we agreed you were going to cover the future," I snarled. "It's pretty disillusioning for a man to find he can't even keep faith with himself."

"Not me, old alter ego," he retorted. "I didn't agree on nothin' with nobody. It must have been one of the others."

"You mean there are *more!*" I yelled.

"More, he says. There are hundreds — thousands maybe. Boy, have we been whizzing back and

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forth through the centuries. Look—there's another one—guess I'm too late this year."

He pointed to the guy who came out of the house behind the brownette Mrs. Leinwand. It was the same guy I'd seen in the later centuries and now I understood why the face was familiar. It had been me all along.

"This position is filled, fellows," he said. "Try another epoch."

We agreed that Bill[3] would cover everything from 2050 to 2583, and I'd take the eras beforehand. Bill[4] refused to be pinned down. He said he'd go on spot-checking whatever centuries appealed to him, as soon as his vacation was over. Somehow that didn't sound at all like me, because I am a very cooperative guy—but who else could he be? Maybe travel was broadening me.

Anyhow, now that I had all these deputies, I could afford to take things a little easier. So I smiled back at the blonde twentieth-century Mrs. Leinwand, when she smiled at me. Apparently none of my other selves had touched this year yet, and I was glad because, even though they were me, I hated to think of . . . well, I didn't like the idea.

"Gee, a Canadian Mountie!" she said, batting her eyes at me. "Come all the way down here. I *am* thrilled!"

"Canadian" . . . *Canada* was the historical name of the northern sectors, and I guessed I was a mounted policeman at that. It was good that my uniform meant something to her, so I didn't look too strange, because the men of that era dressed a little differently from the way we do. Not too much; men's fashions just don't seem to change quickly.

"But you won't get your man here," she pouted, "because there isn't a man in the house. My husband's away on a business trip. Come in and see for yourself."

So I searched the house for a week—her time—and there wasn't any man there, just like she said. Except me, of course.

Then I went on backward. There were no Leinwands in the locality a little further in the past, but Alec didn't necessarily have to be holing up with relatives. I touched century after century methodically, carefully avoiding the Civil War, because I didn't want to get mixed up in politics. I nearly got hanged as a witch back in the seventeenth century, though.

You never hear that New York had any record of witch-hunting—not before the twentieth century anyway. That was because I was their only witch and they couldn't catch me. But it was a narrow squeak, and I was so unnerved by the experience that I jammed all kinds of levers on the cycle.

Before I could disentangle them, I'd traveled back three whole centuries in one blow, landing in the middle of the fourteenth century before the white man had arrived.

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I didn't miss him one bit. It was so peaceful then—you have no idea. There was a tribe of hospitable Indians in the vicinity who took me for a god or something. I didn't even have to hide the time-cycle, because it was just the sort of thing a god with any class is supposed to travel on.

I stayed with the Indians a long while, learning their lingo and everything. I couldn't figure out exactly how much subjective time I spent with them, because they had no calendars. Didn't matter, of course, because I had all the time in the world.

Even so, that lousy conscience of mine started to bother me. I felt I was goldbricking on government time, so finally I said goodbye to the Indians and started on my mission again. I remembered Bill[2] had expected me to check up on him, so I went back to prehistoric times for a quick look. But I avoided the Triassic Period. No sense asking for trouble.

Then I went forward to check on the other Bills. As I traveled, I met a lot of them and, as senior Bill, assigned various eras to them. Pretty soon I ran out of assignments because we were increasing algebraically, not arithmetically. What's more, there were lots of Bills I hadn't even met who were conducting the search in their own way.

Then I had my brilliant idea. Every one of those Bills was me, and I'd promised Jarvis I'd be back on May 25, 2583, at two o'clock. Therefore, all of us would plan on being back at that time. With so many on the hunt, by the law of averages at least one was bound to find Alec Leinwand.

And, if Leinwand resisted arrest, that Bill could always dig up one or more of the other Bills to help him, since we were zooming around the place thick and fast. And Jarvis would have the time corps he wanted, made up of steady, reliable men. So I might as well take it easy. I wouldn't be slacking because I'd be working in the person of all those other Bill Degans.

So I loafed through a few more eras at random, remembering that the time-cycle wasn't mine and I might never again have the chance to use it. And nobody who was ever stuck with living his whole life in just one century ever had it so good.

But finally the time came when I figured duty was calling. Besides, a funny-sounding rattle had developed in the works of the cycle. I realized I had been giving it quite a beating. There was no mechanic I could take it to for an overhaul either. And I was a little homesick, or so I convinced myself.

So one bright sunny day in the spring of 1954 I set the controls for May 25, 2583, one o'clock—the extra hour was to give myself time to get back to headquarters on Staten Island.

I was an expert at handling the pointers by now. I arrived at five

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after one and you couldn't do better than on the cycle. For a moment I wondered if I had hit the right date after all, because the Leinwand house wasn't the tumbledown shack I'd left. It was a handsome, well-cared for mansion, just like it had been in the twentieth century, only modernized, of course. The grounds were elaborately landscaped and there was even a peacock who strutted up to sniff my dusty-time-worn cycle with disgust. Peacocks, yet!

But when I looked at the street, I saw I had the right era. The helicabs were all the model used in my day, and the people were wearing the same type clothes. Only there was something funny about them. They all looked so purposeful. Nobody strolled; nobody slouched . . . and there were hardly any brunets among them. That probably was just a coincidence—one of those things.

I hailed a cruising helicab. I almost said hello to the driver because he looked so familiar, but he didn't seem to know me, so I guessed I'd made a mistake; by now everybody was beginning to look like myself to me.

The driver didn't want to take my time-cycle in his cab, but when I flashed my NAIS badge he could not refuse. He grumbled all the way though—reminded me of Leinwand. Funny thing, I'd almost forgotten that guy as anything except an objective. We'd been friends once, I guess, but that was before he murdered Remsen. I don't pal around with criminals.

I took a gander at the hackie's license. It was dated January 1, 2583, so I was in the right year all right. Just to make sure of the date, I asked, "This *is* May twenty-fifth, isn't it, bud?"

"What are we paying taxes for anyways if the cops can't even detect the date?" he said. "Yeah, it's May twenty-fifth."

So I knew I was back home all right. I should have felt good, but somehow 2583 had the same strange feel to it that all the other centuries had had. I seemed to have lost something that kept me in key with my own time—a kind of sense of chronological balance, I guess. I hoped it would come back; I'd hate not to be able to fit in anywhere.

The cab dropped me on the roof of the station. We dragged out the cycle and I told the driver to send his bill to the department. He told me to drop dead and flew away muttering. I parked the cycle in a corner and asked the cop on duty to keep an eye on it for me.

The guy looked at me in surprise and—well, almost in horror. As if I was a ghost or something. Then he choked a little and said sure he'd be glad to.

I couldn't wait for the lift, so I bounded downstairs to the commissioner's office, three steps at a time, flung open the door, and burst in without knocking, just as the big clock in the tower was

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striking two. I wanted to make my entrance really dramatic.

The chief was sitting at his desk, drumming on the blotter. His face was in shadow but somehow he looked different. I put this down partly to the light and partly to my state of nerves.

"Sir," I said saluting, "I have returned."

I wanted to say my piece quickly before the other Bill Degans came back from the future and started trooping up the stairs, one of them dragging Leinwand behind him. I could imagine the commissioner's face when he saw them crowding into his office, filling it, with thousands more spilling up the stairs and onto the roof. I opened my mouth and he turned his head and looked at me . . . and I got the shock of my life.

The commissioner had the wrong face. Politics or no, they just could not have switched commissioners that fast. Yet this definitely was not Jarvis. Same age, same uniform but that was all the similarity. This guy was leaner, with blue eyes instead of brown and a face that looked like . . . well, like mine would, I guess, twenty years from now—whenever now is.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded angrily—and yet not really angry.

"I'm William Degan," I answered, not knowing what else to day. "I've completed my mission, sir. One of my other selves should be here any moment with Leinwand."

"With *whom?*"

"Leinwand." And that was funny—he should have been more disturbed at the idea of my other selves than at a name. "Don't you remember, sir?" I persisted desperately, still hoping it was all a trick of my nerves and that when I blinked my eyes Jarvis would be back in front of me. Never in all my life had I thought I'd be so anxious to see the old baboon. "An hour ago you sent me into the past on a time-cycle to catch Leinwand for killing Remsen."

"This is utter nonsense!" Even his voice wasn't right. "Sent you into the past . . . time-cycle . . . indeed! And who is this Remsen you say has been killed? Nobody by that name has been murdered in the sector. You're either a fool to expect me to swallow your fantasies about time-travel—or you're a lunatic!"

Something didn't quite ring true about his words; I felt I was the victim of a gigantic frame-up—and yet . . . why?

I listened anxiously for the tramp of feet on the stairs—feet that would prove my story to be true. When this commissioner—whatever his face—saw thousands and thousands of me, he would have to believe. But it was very quiet outside. And it was ten after two already. They were late.

The commissioner pressed his fingertips together. "I must admit that during my younger days, be-

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fore I joined the service, I fooled around with the concept of time-travel . . . but I soon realized what an utter absurdity it was and settled down to being a steady and useful citizen. It wouldn't have been difficult to find that out." He looked at me with my own eyes. "Maybe you're a Plutonian confidence man."

"But I—I—"

He pressed a button on the desk and the blond face of the desk sergeant upstairs appeared before him on the intercom—my face again. "Prakash, this is Commissioner Leinwand. I have a dangerous man here in my office. I don't know whether he's a criminal or just a nut . . ."

"Wait a minute!" I reached over and cut him off. He didn't try to stop me. "Leinwand—you say *your* name is Leinwand?"

"That's right." He looked up at me and his mouth seemed to have an earthquake going on under it. "You must have known that. Otherwise, why did you use my name in your cock-and-bull story about . . . ?"

"Is your first name Alec? Alec Leinwand?"

This time he definitely smiled. "No, as a matter of fact, it's William—Bill Leinwand."

I knew I could stop listening for the tramp of feet on the stairs. The boys would never come. My other selves had crossed me up. They'd never intended to come back. Somewhere in me there must have been a streak of irresponsibility which had developed in them through the centuries.

Maybe that was the kind of thing time-travel did to you. Or maybe it was because I was the original Bill Leinwand—Bill Degan, that is—and they were the copies. On the other hand, maybe they thought they were the originals. Anyway, each one of them was sitting it out in the century of his choice, leaving me to go back alone, complete the mission, and take the rap.

Because *I had completed the mission. I had found Leinwand.* And a fat lot of good it did me!

But I wasn't going to be the fall guy. I had my out too. I turned and rushed out of the office. I ran upstairs to the roof. I got onto the time-cycle. I set her for 1350 and let her go, with a screech of her rusty old motor. Running Water would be glad to see me come back; I had been pretty sorry to leave her.

When Columbus discovered America—if he ever did get to discover America—he'd find blond, blue-eyed Indians this time. And, let them talk about the Vikings all they want. Did you ever hear of a Viking with the name of Degan?

It was only when the cycle had already started that I began to think. Why had the cop let me go right down to the chief's office if he didn't recognize me as one of the force? Why hadn't anybody

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stopped me on the way out, especially after the call the commissioner had so kindly let me interrupt? My thoughts began to pinwheel.

Why had the commissioner carefully told the desk sergeant who he was, when the sergeant could see his face plainly on the screen?

And why, when I had run out of the office had the commissioner done nothing but laugh—laugh as if he would pop his buttons? I'd been able to hear him all the way up the stairs.

They'd expected me all right, and they wanted me to do just what I had done. The whole thing had been set up for my benefit. I was a pretty important guy, all right.

As I have said, the Leinwands have their traditions. I guess I'm one of them.

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brave new strain

by . . . Lee Priestley

It's a mistake to take your work too seriously—if you're wedded to a flighty little woman with a gift for topsy-turvy research.

RUDELLE FLOATED with her hands under her head and looked up at the star patterns etched resplendently against the night sky. Would the research she and Stacey had undertaken help bridge incalculable space? The sharp cold of the desert night against her lifted arms made her more aware of the luxurious warmness of the water that lapped her body. The temperature of this thermal pool was high.

Stacey climbed out to sit on the rimming rocks. "How much longer are you going to parboil?" he asked with a note of irritation in his voice. "I've had enough."

"Another difference between you and me," Rudelle said. "Between men and women, too. We like hot baths while you men think it's virile to shudder under icy showers."

"Cold showers are bracing."

"Okay, you brace. I'll relax." Rudelle snuggled into the soothing water and whispered aloud. "Steak and potatoes; salads and whipped cream desserts . . . lounging around in old clothes; getting dressed up for fun . . . logic as opposed to intuition—"

"How's that?"

A misogynist in the front row of a biochemistry class could cause quite a furor by insisting that men approach research with coolness and precision while women experiment wildly and recklessly with its more explosive aspects in the still of the night, or serve it up piping hot with steaks and potatoes and whipped cream desserts. But Lee Priestley has dared to do just that, in a yarn as rollicking as a footloose troll.

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Rudelle began to swim toward Stacey using a crawl that lifted her face to the night and then quickly submerged it in the warm water. "I was only . . . counting up . . . some of the ways . . . men and women . . . are different."

Stacey snorted. "Count in that make-do mess on the roof yesterday then. And that episode last week."

At the edge of the pool Rudelle held herself away from the moss-grown rocks and frowned up at Stacey huddled in a blanket against the night wind. Even by the dim light of the moon it was plain that her husband, the eminent Doctor Stacey Little, world-famed for his research in organic chemistry, was annoyed—and with his wife.

There was exasperation in the way Stacey's fingers combed his prematurely gray hair. A tightness in the line of his jaw spelled tension and a bleakness had replaced the dryly humorous twinkle in his dark eyes. Certainly there was none of the relaxation Rudelle had hoped would come from a moonlight swim in one of the thermal pools for which Research City was noted.

Was it the strain of near, but elusive, success that made Stacey so irritable? Producing algae, the microscopic single-celled plants that are one of the building blocks of life, as a source of food and oxygen for space ships was literally a problem that reached out to the stars.

She and Stacey hoped to prove that algae could be grown in the ships in transparent tubings exposed to sun and light. Some of the fantastically fecund algae would serve as food for the crew. The rest would be nourished by human wastes, carbon dioxide and nitrogen-rich urine, to provide a constant oxygen supply. Life inside the space ship would be a miniature of the balanced plant-animal cycle of the world.

They were near the goal. But if inspecting bureaucrats from the Department of Space Travel—scheduled to arrive soon—noted no spectacular success there would be no additional appropriation to carry on the work so vital in an overpopulated and underfed world.

But even so, why did Stacey feel so strongly about the two episodes on the roof? She went back in her thoughts to those two afternoons on the roof of the Space Research Foundation building where she and Stacey worked together on the vexatious details of the algae production pilot plant.

"Why don't you—" Rudelle had bit the suggestion off in mid-breath.

Beside her on the bench diminutive Tamiya nudged an elbow into Rudelle's ribs. By the faintest lift of bird-wing brows and an eloquent glance from dark, slanted eyes, she confirmed Rudelle's conviction that now was no time to be helpful. Not with Stacey visibly near the flash point!

It had been hot enough on the roof to make explosion plausible.

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The sun poured intolerably on the glittering maze of steel troughs, glass sheets, and writhing polethelene tubes that made up the Algae-for-Space pilot plant.

And this particular problem, if not solved speedily, would cancel out all the work done previously.

Rudelle whispered in her friend's ear. "You mean there's no time like the present for the little woman to keep her trap shut?"

Tamiya nodded, her black eyes dancing with laughter. Rudelle settled back frowning. Tamiya was no doubt right. Oriental women were born knowing how to efface themselves before the lords of creation. Rudelle's work was not primarily with the pilot plant but she was almost as well known in research chemistry as Stacey.

Stacey Little withdrew the thermometer from the transparent tube where a green soup of chemicals, thick with a strain of algae-chlorella, circulated. Reading it, he ran his hands distractedly through his hair.

"Seventy-five degrees. And getting hotter inside that tube by seconds," he groaned. "Two degrees more and we can write off the whole works. Every blasted cell will be baked!"

Stacey's assistant, Doctor Tokowaga, husband of the dainty and wise Tamiya, moved back and forth in similar distraction wringing his long ivory fingers. "The cooling system will not be ready until tomorrow. Umbrellas? No, not umbrellas." He wagged his head. "We couldn't get enough to shade twenty four feet of tubing soon enough."

Rudelle had looked down at the full skirt she wore, a finger thoughtfully tapping her lips. "Four yards, only one seam. Tear the cloth in two . . . thirty-six times four and multiply by two. Just right! Stacey, unreel the fire hose—"

She unfastened and stepped out of her skirt. Tugging sharply she ripped off the waist band into which the material was gathered. Then she began tearing the long strip of cloth length-wise. The men were staring at her now.

She looked down at her revealed undergarment and told them, "Actually, I'm better covered than when I swim." She handed one of the strips of cloth to her husband. "Lay it over the tubes. Then keep it wet with water from the fire hose until you can do something better."

Stacey had stared at his wife with an enigmatical expression. "What, no hairpins?" Then he thrust the cloth at his assistant. "Hop to it, Toko. Rudelle's crazy make-do may save the algae!"

After a quarter of an hour Stacey read the thermometer again. It registered 65 degrees. He wagged his head at his wife.

"Females!" he said.

"When it's raining soup, any man can catch a bowlful, but it takes a woman to make a meal with a fork," Rudelle said pertly.

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Then yesterday's episode . . . Rudelle frowned, remembering. She had come up after her afternoon leisure break just as a gust of wind, prelude to the sudden southwestern thunder storms, had hurled gravel from the next roof top against the fragile polyetheline tubes of the pilot plant. Streams of thick green algae soup spurted from a dozen holes.

Stacey had yelled at her. "Cover as many holes as you can! I'll get patch—"

Rudelle had hurried. As she came, she had clapped most of the small gray-pink squares she carried into her mouth and began chewing vigorously. According to the formula she had played with down in Synthetics Lab one of the properties of this antique substance was extreme stickiness. When Stacey came panting back moments later, her jaws ached but she was caulking the last puncture.

"What *is* this gunk?" Stacey plucked strings and blobs of the pink-gray stuff off his thumbs as the workmen started sealing the holes in the tubing with more orthodox patches. "Where did it come from?"

"I made up a small batch. I found the formula is an old twentieth century commercial chemistry. It was called 'Bubble Gum'. If you blow—look! Like that!"

One of the last wads of gum began expanding as gases from the tube were forced into it. A pale pink bubble swelled rapidly, then broke with a faint *splot!*

"I thought the stuff would amuse my sister's kids," Rudelle had said defensively, conscious of the workmen's laughter and Stacey's frowning disapproval.

Coming back to the present, Rudelle shook her head. It was puzzling. Stacey huddled deeper against the night cold and when he spoke it was plain that his thoughts had paralleled her own. His tone was patient . . . or was the better word "petulant"?

"Look, honey," Stacey said, "I know you were only trying to be helpful—"

"Trying? I did help. The first time the whole batch would have baked. And the second time your precious tubing was bleeding algae at every pore!"

"Okay, so you stuck your little pinkie in the hole in the dike!" Stacey shouted. "And made me look like a fool!"

Rudelle was astonished. "You actually care what two or three workmen think?"

"When you make me and the project look ridiculous, yes! Work that may determine the fate of millions yet unborn and you plug a hole with a blob of gunk!"

"The gunk stopped the leakage, didn't it?"

"That isn't the point. Science doesn't progress by make-do and messes. It's endless, careful experiment and logical reasoning. Not wild leaps in the dark." He sprang

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to his feet pulling the blanket with him. "You must map out every move, know just where you're going—"

Stacey hadn't mapped his next move, hadn't known where he was going at all. He tripped on the trailing blanket, slipped on the mossy smooth rocks and surged into the steaming pool like a launched liner.

"*Always* look before you leap," Rudelle murmured as his dripping, angry face, smeared with green slimes, emerged from the warm waters.

Rudelle, lying wakeful in the night despite the croon and rock of their lullabed, remembered the green smears and giggled. Stacey had looked like a redskinned aborigine painted and bedecked for the war path. And he had been furious enough to go on one, too. His dignity shattered even as he harangued on its indispensable connection with the algae project. Smeared with green—Rudelle's thoughts jarred to a stop. Those green smears on Stacey's face—

Her eyes wide with the impact of the idea, she raised up on an elbow to shake Stacey into wakefulness. As plain as the nose on your face! How could they have overlooked a point so obvious? Then her hand dropped and she lay back against the purring coolness of her sleeppillow. If she wakened him now, Stacey would surely have something to say about a leap in the dark.

"I'll show him a thing or three about intuition and logic!" she decided. "Map out every move, huh?"

She planned busily until she fell asleep.

Next morning Stacey was distantly polite. He ate breakfast, walked with her to the Cruiseair that wafted them to the roof and the pilot plant, opened doors and stood aside with the impeccable politeness of a stranger. If Rudelle had any qualms about the plans she had made in the night, Stacey's studied coolness removed them. She'd show him!

That she was making analyses while Stacey wrestled with the pilot plant made her plans the easier to conceal. During her leisure time she cruised, liberally peppering the thermal pools with nitrates. The hot southwestern sun raised the water surfaces to a fantastic temperature and the sudden access of food stirred the native algae to a wild activity. Two of the pools responded to become a scummy stew of green one-celled plants frantically dividing and re-dividing in growth.

Rudelle was almost as busy and nearly as feverish as the algae. It was difficult to hide her excitement from Stacey and more difficult not to share the vital new information. She was going to show him. But it wasn't much fun.

Daily she checked the surface temperature of the water in the algae-thick pools. Then she took samples and identified the strains. Chlorella were plentifully present,

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living and growing at a temperature degrees hotter than the highest at which other experimental strains had existed!

When she began culturing the new strain, she found that the scummy green soup held the long-searched-for secret of increasing the efficiency of the photo-synthetic process. It converted the energy of sunshine five times more efficiently than the 77 degree chlorella of the pilot plant, producing one hundred times its own cell volume of oxygen per hour rather than twenty times. Synthetic food and fuel were assured.

And all because you happened to think that since algae are everywhere, in all water and in all soils, the ones growing in hot surface water had to thrive in high temperatures! Rudelle told herself. *This may be the biggest thing since the atom was split!*

She dipped up flasks of the thick green slime and hurried back to the research laboratories. In the elevator the attendant spoke to her.

"Doctor Little was looking for you, Ma'am. Told me to say if I saw you he left a letter on your desk. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to catch a rocket and go make a speech."

Rudelle thanked the man absently, recalling that Stacey was to address the Bread-from-the-Sea Association tomorrow in Burma. She had helped him assemble data on the utilization of plankton, the combination of algae, and small marine life, for human food. Now the new chlorella would make the most optimistic predictions for algae-use obsolete! She'd show Stacey —Rudelle interrupted her gloating to christen the new strain of chlorella as "Type I".

Could she get a crop before the appropriations committee arrived? No cooling system would be necessary, for Chlorella I thrived at temperatures that would kill the masses of the old strain. She could cobble circulators to keep the soup moving and injectors to add carbon dioxide and nitrogen. Then she stubbed a thought against a dismaying obstacle. There wasn't time to construct the big polyethelene tubes that would be needed.

The big transparent sausage-like tubes—Sausage-like? Sausages came in casings—Rudelle laughed impishly. Not only would she show Stacey; she'd show him with exactly the kind of female make-do that infuriated him most!

It was unexpected luck that Stacey's return rocket was delayed so he would arrive somewhat later than the inspecting bureaucrats who wielded the power of life and death for Project Space-Algae via the budget. Rudelle planned to show them first the Chlorella, Type I. Then if they had any enthusiasm left they could visit Stacey's pilot plant where the low temp algae lumbered along like a sky rocket trying to overtake a Nike. Of course Stacey's pilot plant would be operating at its best efficiency. She and

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Doctor Toko with Tamiya's help had taken excellent care of the now obsolete set up. You had to be fair.

Working all night before the inspection they harvested the first crop of Chlorella I and processed it into food stuffs. Half an hour, before the bureaucrats arrived Rudelle wearily admired Tamiya's tea table ready for the visitor's refreshment.

"Everything looks wonderful." She reached for a pale green roll and munched hungrily. "Tastes good, too. Like prunes and nuts?"

She would have liked to sample everything. They had scarcely paused to eat for several days now. Tamiya puttered anxiously at the table, re-arranged the bowls and platters of bread, soup, noodles, cookies — ice cream would be brought out later—all made from, or enriched with, the purified algae pastes.

"My hand was not so light as usual with the pastry," Tamiya worried, "and there was no time to make a second batch." She looked from the tea table to her friend. "Quickly, Rudelle, you must put on another face! Or the gentlemen will see you looking the same green as your new algae!"

Rudelle went to her desk where she kept a makeup box in a drawer. The mirror showed her a face gray with fatigue, if not quite green. She patted rouge and powder on her cheeks and drew careful curves with lipstick, her eyes straying to her desk as she realized she hadn't sat here for days. There had been no time. Not if she were going to show Stacey—

She saw the note then, lying on the blotter with her name on it in Stacey's clear lettering. Rudelle reached for it, belatedly remembering that the elevator man had said something. She had been too hurried to heed.

There were only a few words: *"I'm sorry, dear make-do Missus."*

Rudelle still sat staring at the words when Tamiya came fluttering to summon her. "The gentlemen are here. You must show them the wonderful chlorella you have discovered."

"I?" Rudelle repeated vaguely. "Chlorella?" Then her gaze focused on the dainty little Oriental and she sprang to her feet. "My discovery? Well, I'm going to show somebody all right!"

Leading the queue of bureaucrats, Rudelle was saying, "Now here is Doctor Little's pilot plant—" when she caught sight of Stacey himself.

He stood in the doorway behind the cluster of visitors, rumpled and travel-worn, obviously just off the rocket and understandably confused. Rudelle suppressed a smile, seeing with Stacey's eyes the rubegoldbergian snarl masquerading as a pilot plant. Sausage casings filled with green algae soup, no sign of a cooling system, writhing connections of injectors and centrifuge. As Stacey met Rudelle's eyes over the

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intervening heads, his face flushed with anger.

Rudelle went on composedly, "This is only a make do, of course, until we can get properly set up. Doctor Little felt that it was most important to get to work at once on this new strain of chlorella and leave the details of proper plant design until later. This chlorella growing here converts sunshine energy into food with five times the efficiency of any strain previously used in experiment. It thrives at a temperature of one hundred and two degrees Fahrenheit—" Stacey's face was a study in astonishment now. "—so many of the problems of keeping dense masses alive under bright sunlight are avoided. Doctor Little predicts that this new algae will make the universe independent of natural resources for both food and fuel!"

She paused impressively and smiled at Stacey, hovering thunderstruck in the doorway. "Now I see that Doctor Little has arrived, just in time to receive your congratulations on the success of Project Algae-for-Space!"

She watched Stacey blink as the impact of her words caught him. Then the handshaking committee on appropriations caught Stacey. Finally he brought up against Doctor Toko.

Stacey half shook the little man in his eagerness. "You say Rudelle discovered a new strain of chlorella so efficient you've harvested enough algae to make all this food from one crop? Doesn't seem possible."

Doctor Toko smiled and bobbed liked a mandarin toy. "Also we have isolated several strains with new flavors. The older chlorellas had only a greenish vegetable taste-smell, as you know."

Stacey made a face. "Halfway between overdone broccoli and alfalfa hay."

"Now we have one that is reminiscent of steak and potatoes."

"Then we won't need to look any farther. Who would want any other flavors? Think of all the time and energy saved if there was only one good basic food."

"The ladies are interested in another type that tastes like whipped cream, and others that simulate a vegetable salad and a casserole."

"Stop work on those and concentrate—" Stacey had seen Rudelle.

He elbowed his way to her and caught her hands into his own.

"Junior partner reporting, dear make-do Missus," he said softly.

Rudelle shook her head vehemently. "No questions about equality. Just partners!"

Stacey's smile was a promise. After a long moment he spoke over his shoulder to the hovering Doctor Toko.

"On second thought, let's develop those taste types. What's wrong with differences in taste?" Then he grinned at Rudelle. "You named the new chlorella 'Type I'. Does it figure—logically!—that the 'I' stands for 'intuition'?"

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the sixth season

by . . . Jacques Jean Ferrat

He was young, and in love, and he could charm the ears off a brass monkey. Why should a scholar from Time—plan his future for him?

MARALYN WAS acutely aware of the insidious roll of too-mature flesh that was ever threatening to overflow the top of her panty-girdle as she regarded with resignation rather than envy the perfection of Lora McQuade's young body. Lora, clad in the absurdly revealing bits of lace that constituted her second-act costume, was repowdering her shoulders with a stick-puff to forestall the shine of sweat.

According to the stage directions the second act occurred in February. But while the audience sat comfortably in the induced cool of air-conditioning, there was no disguising the fact that, back of the footlights, it was August in New York. It was sweating time.

Maralyn stood under the tiny electric fan which labored loudly and ineffectually against the thermometer-popping temperature and said, "Lora, Bobby's a nice kid. He's crazy about you. Why don't you give him a break?"

"Why don't you ask me to go out with the second cornet?" Lora countered, laying down the stick-puff and talking to Maralyn in the mirror. "Since when have I had time for nice kids? So he's nice?

If we could see ourselves in some mysterious, youth-dissolving mirror of the remote future how many of us would not prefer to remain as we are? Undying fame may have its rewards, but surely none are quite as happy as the young lovers, as Jacques Jean Ferrat is here determined to prove.

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So what? He couldn't even make the down payment on an alley-cat mink."

"He's going to be big one of these days," warned Maralyn. "Take my word for it, Lora-baby, Bobby's got the spark. I've seen it too many times in the theater not to know it when it turns up. And he can do a lot for you in the long run."

Lora swung around and looked up at the older actress. From beneath the deliciously soft and rounded contours of her unblemished young face stared a stony hardness that reminded Maralyn of the rock-sculptured figures on Mount Rushmore.

She said, "Maralyn, wake up. The only reason I took this job was because it looked like a chance to get ahead—and I don't mean in the theater. It gives me a chance to put what I got on display without having to cut with the syndicate or get pinched by some lousy cop.

"And I'm doing okay, thank you. I got one Wall Street corporation lawyer, one chain-store bigshot and three brokers on the string. And sooner or later one of them's going to break down and want to marry me—when I put the screws on."

"Sure," said Maralyn. "And the corporation lawyer's got a corporation, the chain-store mogul has sampled so much of his own food he must weigh three hundred pounds and the best of your broker pals looks like Colonel Blimp."

"So what?" the girl said again. "So I marry one of them and he either kicks off or I make him glad to pay me alimony the rest of my life. When *I'm* loaded, then's the time to start looking for kicks."

"What about that Hollywood offer last week?" asked Maralyn, who would cheerfully have given her soul for such a break.

"Don't make me laugh," said Lora cynically. "You know what it's like for a girl like me out there? I do—I've heard about it from some of the kids in the racket who've made it. They got to do just what the studio bosses tell them or else they're through. And the things some of those studio bosses want them to do . . ."

"Okay," Maralyn said wearily, "I'm not trying to preach. But you've not only got looks, Lora-baby, you've got authentic talent. I'm too much theater to enjoy seeing it go to waste."

"I've got authentic talent," said Lora quietly, "but it's not limited to the theater. Show business is too uncertain. No offense, Maralyn, but if you think for a minute I want what you've got you're crazy. Scrimping on a lousy run-of-the-play salary and mending your stockings so you'll have enough to get through a poor season when this show ends. Or going on the road and living in cheesy hotels, or maybe riding out the summer in a hick stock-company at Equity scale?"

"I wish you'd at least *see* Bobby," Maralyn told her. "He *is* a nice kid and this brush-off treat-

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ment you're giving him is tearing him to pieces. It's beginning to effect his work and that's bad for the whole company."

"Is that skin off my hips?" Lora asked angrily. "Listen, Maralyn, that crazy kid may not be Irish but somebody in his family sure must have kissed the Blarney stone. He can charm the ears off a brass monkey and believe it or not I'm not made of brass." She paused and for a moment her ice-blue eyes went soft. "Once I start listening to him I'm cooked and I know it. So lay off, will you?"

"Okay," said Maralyn, shrugging. "But it's your loss. He's a really nice guy."

In her fifteen-plus years on Broadway Maralyn had never known it to fail—sooner or later, in a long-run play like *The Sixth Season,* personalities began to clash, temperamental differences developed into feuds, romantic dissonances divided the company into armed camps.

She knew what caused it all too well. The effect of relative security upon a small group of people geared to lives of uncertainty was one factor. The deadening monotony of enacting the same roles night after night was another. And when you added the immense egotism that merely being an actor demands. . . .

There was a rap on the door and she opened it. Paddy, the runtish assistant stage manager, handed Maralyn a card, jerked his head toward Lora. Lora took it, read it, shrugged bare shoulders, passed it back to Maralyn. It read, in an oddly uncertain handwriting:

Miss McQuade—

I should like very much to pay you a visit backstage during the recess between acts and felicitate you upon the magnificence of your performance.

Dr. Aldis Spear.

Maralyn said, "Well, you got you another fan, Lora-baby."

Lora said, "He must be a real flat. Get a load of that 'recess between acts.' Didn't he ever hear of an intermission?"

"Maybe he was excited and forgot the words," said Maralyn tolerantly. "What are you going to do about him?"

Lora shrugged, replied, "He's a man, isn't he? And I might need a doctor one of these days. Tell Paddy to send him in."

Dr. Spear proved to be an amiable elderly gentleman with a red face and white hair that broke winging away from his forehead like foam from the bows of a ship. He looked uncertainly at Maralyn, then at Lora, and his face took on an expression of awe.

Maralyn made a move toward the door but her roommate made an imperceptible gesture for her to hang around. And on second look, Maralyn decided, the stranger was definitely odd. His clothing was obviously expensive, but it was also obviously wrong. Formal black jacket with diagonally striped gray

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ascot tie, loosely-cut glen-plaid slacks and saddle shoes. He looked like an accident in a men's clothing store window.

Furthermore, he appeared even more uncomfortable in his outré outfit than the sudden transition from the cool of the audience to the backstage heat could account for. He looked like a teen-ager in his first tuxedo, moved as if he were afraid something would fall off at any moment.

He said, and to Maralyn his speech was a trifle too careful, "Ah, Miss McQuade, I cannot express to you how supremely gratifying it is to see you thus at the very start of your career."

"Thank you." Herself uncertain about the status of the visitor, Lora had withdrawn into the taut formality that was one of her defences. "This your first visit to the show, Dr. Spear?"

"Er—yes, yes it is, alas," he replied. "It has proved unexpectedly stimulating if not quite what I might have expected. You see we—I, that is, had put a somewhat different interpretation upon the script of your—er—show."

"I don't know how else you'd interpret a play about a lot of call girls," said Lora, frowning slightly. "After all, I got—"

"Please, Miss McQuade," said the visitor. "You must not mind my inadvertent criticism. You see, such customs are not a part of—have never been—"

"You look old enough to know the facts of life." Lora was showing signs of impatience. "What do you think men want girls for?"

"Easy, baby," said Maralyn. She smiled at the doctor, said, "You must come from out-of-town?"

"In a way—yes," he replied. "You might say that I have come from a long way off."

"They still got two sexes where you come from?" Lora snapped.

"Of course." He paused, wet his lips with a ping tongue-tip, then blurted, "You might say I am a student of the twentieth century theater from afar, Miss McQuade. Hence I have found myself fantastically interested in the start of a great career. You may not now realize it, Miss McQuade, but you and Roberto Littorio—"

"That's enough!" Lora stood up, turned to Maralyn, said, "You can entertain this creep from Creepville if you want to. Me, I'm not falling for any clownish gag like this one. Sending a carney character around to plug Bobby's cause! That's the end! And you can tell him I said so!"

She slammed the door hard behind her as she left.

Maralyn looked at the door, then at Lora's visitor. For some reason she could not define she felt a little afraid. Something of her emotions must have shown in her expression for he said, "If you please, Miss—er—I am wholly harmless. Though I do not quite see how I am to explain my presence comprehensibly."

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"Did Bobby send you?" Maralyn asked, lighting a cigarette.

He watched her as if he had never seen anyone light up before, then said, "Bobby?"

"You called him by name a moment ago—Roberto Littorio. Did he pay you to come back here and hand Lora that line?"

"I do not comprehend," he said, looking dazed. "Roberto—Bobby? Oh, I believe I understand. No." He smiled. "No, my coming back here was my own idea."

"Then tell me this," said Maralyn, pulling her dressing gown about her and sitting on her own dressing table. "You mentioned just now that you found our playing different from the script of *The Sixth Season*. Unless you're a friend of the author or the producer, how come you've seen a script? It's not to be published until this fall."

"I assure you that I have read it, that my pupils have read it in my classes for years." He stopped abruptly and the high color faded from his face. He looked as frightened as Maralyn had felt a few moments earlier.

She said bluntly, "What is this—are you crazy?"

"I do not believe so," he replied. He hesitated, then drew a notebook from his hip pocket, opened it, showed it to her. "I teach in a sort of—I believe you would call it a university. My subjects are English and the English drama."

"Oh, you're *that* kind of a doctor," said Maralyn.

"The title is permitted my office," he informed her in his odd too-punctilous speech. "When I said I have come a long way I was speaking only part of the truth. I teach not far from here, yet it is very distant. I have come across time to see this performance."

Maralyn dropped her cigarette. While reaching to pick it up she decided that, since Lora's visitor was a nut, it might be wise to humor him. She said, dabbing sweat carefully from the makeup on her forehead with a piece of tissue, "If you came from the future, Professor, how come you picked this play to see? It's a flop."

"It is simple," he told her. "In my time we know the western drama from the Greeks to Sardou. But our records of this period in which you live have been almost wiped out. *The Sixth Season* is the first play of which we have copies over a fifty-year gap. Also, it is the start of the great careers of Lora McQuade and Roberto Littorio, who restored the theater with their amazing new techniques after its destruction by three-dimensional television in color."

"You've sure got it down pat," said Maralyn admiringly, "There's just one thing wrong with the patter, Professor—*The Sixth Season* is probably the worst stinker to fall flat on its puss into a long Broadway run since *Abie's Irish Rose*."

"*Abie's Irish Rose?* Another

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comedy, I presume," he asked, scribbling in his notebook with an odd-looking stylus.

"The jury's still out on that one," Maralyn told him. "But there's no doubt about *this* one. You know, Professor, when this show opened, Richard Jean Kerr, the critic, wrote, quote—'Last night a rider, wearing the costume of Paul Revere, clattered southward down Longacre Square, brandishing a lantern and crying, *"The Sky's the Limit* is no longer the worst play in town, *The Sixth Season* has just opened" '—unquote. That was fourteen months ago and we expected to close that Saturday. We're still running and selling out. Don't ask me why."

"In my era it is considered an invaluable social document," said Dr. Spear solemnly.

"You'd better get the hell back there before you lose all your illusions, Professor," said Maralyn.

There was a rap on the door and Bobby Littorio poked his not unhandsome head through a crack. He said, "Maralyn, I see Lora's up on deck. Is it safe to come in for a moment? I want to talk to you."

"Sure, Bobby," said Maralyn. "The Professor here is a great admirer of your work. Aren't you, Professor?"

The twin wings of Dr. Spear's white hair looked about to sever company with his scalp as he regarded the stage manager with even greater awe. He said worshipfully, "Ah, the young Roberto Littorio! I know you by your pictures, which we have and treasure. You may not know it, young man, but it is you who will create a renaissance of the western theater in the second half of this century."

"What crack did he crawl out of Maralyn?" Bobby asked impatiently. "Get rid of him, will you? I want to talk to you about Lora."

Maralyn said, stifling another quiver of fear that accompanied the realization that the visitor was not some stooge sent by Bobby to soften up Lora, "Dr. Spear says he's a time traveler, come back from the future to see our greatest actress in her first play."

Bobby blinked, stared at the professor, then winked solemnly at Maralyn. "I am honored, sir," he said with a half-bow. Then, doing a double-take, "You're not talking about Lora McQuade! Oh, no! She has the soul of a cash register! She's not an artist!"

"You and Miss McQuade will be the theater's greatest director-actress team, young man." The professorial dignity was evidently ruffled. "Also husband and wife."

"No, no—not that—*never!*" Bobby struck a pose of dramatic renunciation and Maralyn turned her face away to hide her laughter.

"But you will!" Dr. Spear protested patiently. "And your use of the focal center, of mirrors and breakaway sets will reconstitute what you today call the theater-in-the-round as a wholly new art-form."

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Bobby shot an uneasy glance at Maralyn, said, "If this cube has been sneaking a look at my desk drawer, I'll—"

Paddy stuck his head in, said, "One minute to second-act curtain," and withdrew.

"Good God!" exclaimed Bobby. "What am I doing up here?" He darted for the door, paused to say from the threshold, "And, Maralyn, tell Lora to stay away from me. The next time she wants a stooge tell her to try one of her rich boy friends. They can afford it—I can't."

Dr. Spear stared at Maralyn, bewildered. "How have I achieved offense?" he inquired plaintively. "There is so much I must know and my time is so short. You see I am not really supposed to use the temporal displacement machines at all. They are reserved for much more important work than mine—universe spanning to bypass the speed of light, research into the formative stages of Earth . . ."

"You wait right here until I get back," said Maralyn now really afraid. Granted, the stranger seemed a harmless lunatic. But there was no telling when he'd get violent. She decided to pass the word along to Bobby to have him picked up by the boys in the white coats.

But Paddy grabbed her as she left the dressing room, said, "For God's sakes, Maralyn, you're on!" and shoved her rudely toward the iron stairway down to the stage.

She was barely in time to pick up her cue from Lora as she swept onstage for her one big second-act scene, with Lora as the rebellious call-girl in her employ and fine veteran actor Ian Williams as the common-law husband Lora was stealing to get even for a fancied insult.

Before her second speech Maralyn sensed that Lora was charged. An instinctive actress, utterly without inhibitions, the girl was playing over her head—or perhaps, Maralyn thought fleetingly, she was playing up to the real level of her talent for the first time. Maralyn felt herself caught up in the surge of emotion, realized that Ian had also been lifted by the girl's savage attack.

The Sixth Season, as all connected with it knew, was a piece of tawdry trash that radiated a spurious sort of glitter and excitement, dealing as it did with a modern version of the oldest profession. Yet it had, in spots, a certain raw power. And this scene was perhaps its strongest. It was that night at any rate.

Not until it was almost over did Maralyn discover the reason. Then she saw that Bobby was standing in the wings and that Lora was playing at him, expressing her anger toward him by becoming a raging young nemesis in her part. Then the curtain was falling and a terrific wave of applause was rolling toward them from the audience. Not even on opening night had there been such an ovation.

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Maralyn hurried offstage. As she passed a stunned-looking Bobby she heard him mutter, "Another Duse! Another Duse—incredible!" She found Paddy coming down the dressing room stairs, collared him, said, "Is that lunatic still in our room?"

Paddy shook his head, looked puzzled. He said in his flat Irish-American accent, "Jeest, Maralyn, I dunno what happened to him. One minute he was there, the next time I look in he's gone. And I ain't seen him leave."

"He probably took off in his time machine," said Maralyn, exhaling her relief. Then, seeing the look on Paddy's freckled face, she added, "Just make sure he doesn't get in there again, will you? I think he's off his rocker, Paddy."

"Never fear, I'll handle him," said Paddy, proud at being thus given such responsibility. He swaggered off, whistling to himself.

Dr. Spear was gone but his notebook and stylus still lay on Lora's dressing table. After lighting a cigarette Maralyn picked up the stylus, saw that it was unlike any pen or pencil she had ever seen. She thought, *Oh, well—these underwater pen people come up with a new gizmo every month or so,* tested it on a piece of cleansing tissue. It failed to produce a line.

She opened the notebook, tried the pen on a blank page. The rabbit-eared doodle she drew came perfectly clear. The book itself felt oddly light, its pages oddly thick for such a compact object with so many pages. She began leafing through it. It was three-quarters packed with notes, apparently written in some sort of spidery shorthand of which she had no knowledge.

She came to a newspaper clipping, sere and yellowed. . . .

Lora slammed the door when she lame in, said, "Of all the damn fool idiotic gags. Sending that apricot around here pretending he's a man from the future. He damned near broke me up out there—I couldn't even think of the scene I was so sore."

She paused, looked at Maralyn, added, "I'm going to hunt that Bobby down right now and tell him off, but good!"

She slammed the door again as she went out, leaving her roommate staring vacantly after her. Maralyn went back to reading the clippings in the notebook the stranger had left. . . .

When someone knocked on the door she said, "Come in,.. absently, then, "Oh, hello, Ian," as the veteran actor came into the room.

He filched one of her cigarettes from the pack on her dressing table, lit it and said, "You know, Maralyn, we've got to do something about that crazy little fool. If we don't it's going to waste."

"I take it," said Maralyn, "that by 'that crazy little fool' you mean Lora and by the 'it' you fear is going to waste, her talent."

"This is not high comedy," said

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Ian resentfully. He had a voice that was the finely-tuned and delicate instrument of the trained stage performer.

"If you ask me," she replied, "it's more a science fiction drama." Then, before he could speak again, "I know what you mean, of course, Ian darling, and I had it out with Lora just before she went on."

"Then you're responsible for the way she played that last act tonight?" Ian Williams inquired.

"No, not I." Maralyn shook her head. "Pippa passed or Mr. Pym passed by or six who passed while the lentils boil or something. I haven't quite figured it out."

"But you know the way that little fool's headed," said the actor, frowning. "If she isn't channeled rightly—and soon—she's going to wind up just another alimony hound. And with all her natural gifts . . ."

"I know," said Maralyn, "but unless I'm way off-base and a certain young man we both know has lost his gift of gab you don't need to worry, Ian. Right now, I'd guess, Lora's about to try scratching his eyes out. But in about forty-five seconds . . ." She glanced at the watch on her wrist meaningfully.

"I hope you're right," said Ian. "It'll be a damned shame if she does get lost." He paused, added, "You know, Maralyn, you're not only a fine actress and a fine woman, you're, well—I hope you won't consider me forward if I suggest we might bend a bagel at Lindy's or somewhere when you're dressed."

"You don't have to make like Laurie in *Little Women* to get a date with me, you crazy mixed-up kid," Maralyn told him.

He laughed, said, "Believe it or not I've been trying to get my nerve up for a couple of months now." Then, noticing the book in her hand, "What's that you're reading?"

"Just some old press clippings," she said. When she made no effort to let him see them too he ducked out with a, "Half an hour all right by you, Maralyn?"

She nodded, her eyes bright, looked again at the book in her hand. It was all there in the clippings—Lora's sensational success under the tutelage of her brilliant young husband-director, Roberto Littorio, her rise on hit after hit in an exciting new theatrical development that restored the living theater to its former glory despite the obvious handicaps of television, radio and the three-dimensional cinema.

She wanted to show it to Ian, to explain away its improbability. But she couldn't. Because something else was in it as well—a mention, in an article on the tenth anniversary of the Lora-Roberto marriage, of the fact that two of the fine character leads, around whom their company was built, were also celebrating a tenth anniversary. Their names were Maralyn Forsythe and Ian Williams, who had taken part in a double wedding with the stars.

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You couldn't show something like that to a man you hadn't even had your first date with—or could you? Maralyn decided it wasn't worth taking the chance. Perhaps later on, when it had all come to pass. . . . She opened the drawer of her dressing table to stash the notebook out of sight until she could find a proper hiding place for it.

And, suddenly, Maralyn froze, her eyes on the dressingtable mirror, staring incredulously.

Dr. Spear was back. She hadn't heard him come in but he was there. He held out a hand, said, "Please, I'd really be lost without my notes. And the clippings are very rare and of immense value."

"Of course, Professor," she said and handed it over.

He eyed her curiously, said, "I didn't realize when I was here before—you're Maralyn Forsythe, aren't you?".

"Guilty," she replied. "I wish I knew who *you* are."

"I have to go now," he told her. He bowed politely, put the book back in the hip pocket of his absurd plaid pants, walked slowly through the door and closed it quietly behind him before she could recover from her surprise at his sudden departure.

"Hey!" she cried. "Just a moment, Professor." She jumped for the door, opened it, looked both ways.

The long corridor outside was empty.

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assassin

by . . . Algis Budrys

Modern science at its deadliest could not mar the perfection of Stetten's skill as an assassin, for he liked watching people die.

HE WAS a balding, black-haired man, his face touched by that excessive pinkness which later, in so many aggressive individualists, becomes a "hearty" red. He was under average in height, running to fat. His name was Stetten, and he is the assassin.

He refolded the onionskin-paper list and handed it back to Blonger, shaking his head. He threw up his hands in a regretful but decisive shrug. "I'm afraid not."

Blonger had a wide mouth set in a broad jaw. He smiled with what, in a normal face, would have been instantly recognizable as excessive confidence. "We think you can do it, Mr. Stetten."

Stetten regarded him patiently, as though he were looking at a fool whom he could not afford to ignore. "You might be able to find someone who'll *try*. But he'll have to be a fanatic with strong political feelings."

"We are not interested in fanatics, Mr. Stetten."

Stetten shrugged again. "I enjoy being an assassin," he said, obvi-

In three short years Algis Budrys has become something of a Nova in the science-fiction firmament, outshining many fixed stars of a more readily calculable magnitude. It is Mr. Budry's versatility which makes a critical appraisal of his work difficult, for he is constantly surprising and dazzling us anew with themes totally divergent. His memorable SHADOW ON THE STARS, *for instance, spanned vast areas of space and time, and this story doesn't at all. But both stories shine with a distinctly Novalike brilliance.*

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ously striving to make a point despite his certitude that it would be over Blonger's head. "It is a challenge to the whole man. In the fine art of assassination it is necessary to combine thoughtful planning with the ability to improvise; to train one's reflexes to the point where they respond instantly. Otherwise, there is no hope of any success except by sheer luck."

"And you have been consistently successful over the years," Blonger said, nodding.

Stetten grimaced. "The point I am trying to make is this: that I have not refused lightly. I am, if you'll pardon me, an expert, and my expert opinion is that this scheme will not work. It will not work because it is unprecedented in sheer scope. If all the men on that list die, every bit of planning done for the last hundred years might as well be thrown out the window.

"An archduke here, or a president there—" He shrugged. "But this is different. This is mass execution. It is the deliberate murder of any future Man has visualized for himself. I cannot even conceive of what society, what political structure would result if these men were no longer on the scene. I doubt if anyone can. You are attempting to fire a shotgun into the future, without any hope of being able to control the results."

He leaned forward. "Obviously, such a project has a tremendous appeal to me. On the one hand, I am convinced that no one could accomplish what you want. Not in the face of the safeguards which surround these men. But, on the other hand, though I refuse, I shall always think the less of myself for doing so."

He looked at Blonger, his eyes searching to see whether he had succeeded in penetrating that broad blandness. "But, in spite of that last consideration, I do refuse."

Blonger smiled broadly. "I see your point, of course." He chuckled. "But I think I can satisfy you. We decided to first learn your feelings toward the project before we told you the full story. Frankly, we were afraid you might have—well, suppose we call them moral scruples."

Stetten looked at him with thinly-veiled disgust.

Blonger went on smoothly. "Inasmuch as your only hesitation is based on technical difficulties . . ." He seemed to enjoy the phrase, rolling it around on his tongue like a professional wine-taster. "Mr. Stetten, we can guarantee that there will be *no* technical difficulties. This is, after all, the Twenty-first Century, and our organization is nothing if not modern. If you'll come with me, I'll show you something we've developed. It's in the next room."

Stetten arched his already curvilinear eyebrows, but he got to his feet notwithstanding.

Blonger was talking on. "Organization, Mr. Stetten is something a lone-wolf like yourself does very

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well without, but it has its advantages. For example, one of our minor contacts gave us your name. A totally unrelated source knew where to find you. And another of our members developed the means whereby you will be able to help us. You see?"

He opened the door to the next room and stepped aside, leaving the way clear for Stetten to precede him. Then he touched Stetten's arm suddenly, as though in hasty afterthought. "Are you carrying a weapon?"

Stetten looked at him in complete disgust. "No."

"Here, then." Blonger pushed a Colt's self-charger into his hand.

Stetten grimaced down at the gleaming sidearm and seemed ready to throw it back at the perspiring man. Then he shrugged scornfully and stepped into the room. He died instantly.

II

His face streaming with perspiration, Blonger stared at the emptiness in the doorway, ignoring the crumpled body that had been Stetten's. His lips were moving spasmodically. "Don't shoot!" he mumbled prayerfully. "Please don't shoot. *Don't,* Stetten! In the name of heaven—"

Abruptly, he turned with a convulsive heave of his body. "Giulio!" he shouted in panic. "Dr. Giulio! Hurry!"

He kept throwing frightened glances at the doorway, his head jerking back to look over his shoulders, which were hunched as though in expectation of instant death.

Assassin stood quietly in the doorway, the murky gun in his murky hand, watching Blonger, waiting.

But there was nothing in the doorway.

Two hulking men, clutching another between them, shouldered their way through the door into the first room. They pushed the forcibly escorted man farther into the room and took up positions to either side of the door.

The third man was dressed in an old laboratory smock. He was holding a lensed projector of some sort in one hand, and his eyes were hidden behind a pair of complicated goggles. "Yes?" he said to Blonger in an exhausted voice.

"He's ready. *Hurry up, Giulio!*" Blonger was trembling violently.

"*Hurry!*" he reiterated.

Dr. Giulio sighed and pushed a switch on the projector. A fitful blue light flickered across the room. Giulio swung his head from side to side, searching. His fingers adjusted the projector's lenses. Then he saw Assassin and pointed. "There he is."

Blonger snapped his head around as though his face had been slapped. "Is he going to shoot?"

Giulio shook his head tiredly. "I don't think so."

Assassin stood motionless, waiting for the next move.

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"Well, then, *tell* him!" Blonger almost screamed.

Giulio shrugged, well past concern for himself or anything else. He faced Assassin and began to speak in his beaten voice.

"I can see you. I cannot hear anything you say. No one else can either hear or see you. You realize that you are experiencing the phenomenon called 'death'?"

Assassin nodded.

"Good. Now: there are two aspects to every material object, including those objects which are additionally endowed with what is called 'life.' These two aspects are the material—the aspect which is apparent to the five human senses—and the electrical, or electronic, or sub-atomic, whichever designation you prefer.

"Matter is composed of molecules, molecules consist of atoms, and atoms are made up of electrons, positrons, and even smaller particles, each a swirling vortex of what is called 'energy.'

"Listen carefully now."

He brushed a tired hand over his face, then went on as though reading a lecture for the thousandth weary time. "Inasmuch as this energy may be considered, for purposes of this discussion, as electrical in nature, it follows that every atom of matter radiates a characteristic signal, and that these signals, in turn, when considered as a combined 'broadcast,' form a complete electronic shadow of their parent material object."

"Get *on* with it!" Blonger barked shrilly.

Giulio ignored him.

"In the case of living beings, this shadow, having as part of itself the signals generated by the brain, is potentially capable of intelligence, volition, and action. Since the shadow is dependent, during life, on the existence of the material body, there is no way for it to exercise independent volition of its own. Any research on the relationship of shadow to living body can, therefore, be only theoretical in nature."

Giulio paused to set the projector down on the floor, apparently finding its weight insupportable. There were deep manacle-scars on his wrists.

"In the case of ordinary death, the shadow, of course, decomposes with the body and gradually is lost. I am not prepared to state what happens to the shadow's intelligence, ego, id, or whatever you may choose to call the sum of its mental attributes."

He looked grimly at his wrists.

Assassin twitched his mouth at Giulio's careful avoidance of the disquieting word "soul."

"In the case of violent death, however, the shadow seems to be jarred loose from the body, and takes up a brief independent existence of its own. It, too, gradually fades away. I am not prepared to state what process accompanies that fading."

Nor did Giulio mention

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"ghosts." But then, he had a scientific explanation.

"You are, of course, such a shadow—with two important differences. You have been killed violently, but the attack was not on the material body, as has always been the case previously. The attack was directed against the link between the material body and the shadow, much as an electron shell is stripped away from the nucleus of an atom. There is no longer *any* link between you and the former human being, not even the tenuous one which apparently remains after even the most violent ordinary death. There is every expectation that you will continue your independent existence indefinitely. In fact, it is almost a certainty.

"Second, and most important to my—" Giulio paused, his mouth twisting. "—employers, you have a weapon to which the same process has been simultaneously applied. This experiment is, of course, completely unprecedented, since inanimate objects do not 'die' in nature."

He turned from the doorway, stripping off his goggles. "I have now completed my part in your instruction. The estimable Mr. Blonger will resume from here." He handed Blonger the goggles at arm's length and nodded to his guards. "All right, you may return me to my cell."

He looked back once. "I'm sure that a man of your attainments will enjoy his association with this pack of jackals," he said bitterly, and was hustled out of the room.

III

Blonger adjusted the goggles over his face. He had regained something of his former confidence, but it was necessary for him to draw a deep breath before he could address Assassin.

"I gather that you understand what Dr. Giulio has told you," he said finally.

Assassin nodded shortly.

"Very well, then. You understand your position. You are, to ordinary human perception, completely immaterial. Without the aid of this special apparatus, which is the only one of its kind, you cannot be seen, heard, felt, or acted upon. No human weapon can affect you in any manner whatsoever.

"This means, of course, that you could turn around at this moment and pursue your own inclinations, refusing flatly to help us. We have no way of coercing or persuading you. However, I will explain our plans, and then you can decide for yourself. Will you listen?"

Assassin shrugged.

Blonger mopped his forehead, which had broken out with fresh perspiration. His attention seemed to be focussed not so much on Assassin as it was on the gun in his hand. He seemed incapable of breaking the fascination the weapon held for him.

"All right," he said. "It is now possible for you to penetrate any

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safeguards or precautions surrounding the men on the list I showed you. I am not attempting to pass judgment, and I admit my inability to put myself in your place. However, it seems to me that a project of this nature must still have considerable appeal for you. As you have yourself said, here is an unprecedented opportunity to — you will pardon my paraphrase—stir the broth of human history and observe what bubbles will rise.

"That is one reason why we thought you might be willing to carry on our commission. There is another, which I shall explain to you presently."

Assassin shrugged again. He seemed unconcerned with Blonger's explanations, and that, too, contributed to the man's nervousness.

"Just as no human being can affect you, so you, conversely, cannot harm in any way a human being's material body."

Blonger licked his lips nervously, his eyes fastened on the gun. "But with that specially provided weapon," he said, "it is possible for you to kill other shadows. In short, to kill souls."

And there the word was, at last, naked in the aseptic, pitiless light of Twenty-first Century modernity. Blonger did not use the word in its Biblical sense, of course. Or, at least, he was convinced he did not. But he was a badly frightened man, nevertheless, and for a moment it seemed that he would unconsciously relapse into his former monotone mumbling of: "Don't shoot! *Please* don't shoot!"

He missed actually doing that by a hair. He summoned a measure of pride out of some deep mental recess and achieved sufficient self-assurance to enable him to keep his voice level.

"Our researches indicate," he said, "that a human being deprived of his shadow—of his characteristic radiation, let us say—somehow loses his ability to initiate complex chains of thought. He responds to stimuli exactly as might someone who has undergone a pre-frontal lobotomy. He is deprived of his higher mental powers."

He ran a hand over his forehead and brought it away coated with moisture. "That is our objective in regard to the individuals on our list. A form of assassination far more subtle than any other yet devised."

Assassin nodded slowly, a flicker of considerable interest breaking through the shroud of mist that made his image dark and murky even through the special goggles.

"This brings us to our second inducement," Blonger said. Now that his worst fear was over, his natural confidence in himself and the power of his organization was coming back. "Such a person, deprived of his shadow, is susceptible to the superimposition of a new shadow. To put it briefly and generally, it will be possible for you to select a suitable body, kill its shadow, and substitute yourself.

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You will then, for want of a better phrase, return to life, ready to enjoy the considerable material benefits which we can offer."

He paused and waited. Assassin waited with him, and finally Blonger asked impatiently: "Will you do it?"

Assassin nodded.

IV

Senator Cooper sat in his office, reading the final draft of a bill which he planned to introduce into Congress immediately following the opening session roll call. His secretary waited beside his desk, ready to type in any last-minute changes in wording.

Assassin aimed carefully and fired. The self-charger spat out a bullet composed of sub-atomic particles that struck the components of the Senator's shadow. The shadow disrupted violently, and there might, or might not, have been a thin scream.

The Senator rubbed his hand violently over his eyes, then sat staring dully at the paper before him.

"Senator?" His secretary looked at him anxiously. "Senator? Are you ill?"

The Senator looked up. "I'm all right?" He blinked a few times, then, suddenly, he laughed hysterically. "As a matter of fact, I feel great. Boy! No troubles at all! Now, what's this thing?" He slapped the bill. "Oh, sure, I remember. Best armament expenditure bill ever written. Perfect. Man, I'm the best little ol' legislator this man's congress ever saw." He sat back in his chair, dreaming dreams of the Presidency his delighted constituents were sure to bestow upon him.

The secretary looked at him closely, her expression gradually becoming one of understanding. She reached down beside her for a manila envelope, opened it, and took out the bill the organization had prepared. She laid it on the Senator's desk. "Here you are, sir," she said, slipping the Senator's draft off the desk. "Here's the final copy."

Assassin gave his undivided attention to the next name on the list.

He could not risk garbling himself by attempting to interpenetrate the shadows cast by walls. But the shape of his body was not necessarily rigid.

He came through the crack between the door and its jamb, raised the gun, and fired. The President complained of a headache shortly afterward. His personal physician recommended an extensive vacation while his able advisors wrote a few of his minor speeches for him. There were, of course, several trained actors on standby pay who were perfectly capable of duplicating the President's voice and appearance. No one would question the substitution for the few days in which the President would be getting his complete rest.

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The President thought it was an excellent idea.

But for Assassin there was no rest.

Commandante Ataulfo Vega y Lopez stepped out on the balcony overlooking the cheering throng of *descamisados*. He raised his arm in the old, glorious salute, and twenty thousand throats and arms answered as one.

Assassin fired.

* * *

Comrade Kuznecov stared frostily down at the massed ranks of men parading through the square below while a column of tanks roared hungrily past. Overhead, aircraft shot across the sky with a whistling scream, spelling out NCCP for all the world to see and tremble at.

Kuznecov drew himself up.

A cold smile touched the corners of his mouth, fighting the old, habit-cast reluctance of his face to deviate from the safe mask of impassiveness. But he permitted himself the smile. He was sure no one could see it.

Assassin fired. This time, there was the faintest probability that *something,* in a terror-stricken voice, had shouted *bozhe moi!* before the long night crushed it.

Comrade Kuznecov's face did not change. His hands remained at his sides. Only the walls of his mouth bled as he clamped his teeth on them. To show pain, to falter, to let slip one clue of weakness—was death as surely as Comrade Soong stood ambitiously beside him.

Another week, another place.

Assassin fired. Assassin drifted over the face of the Earth, firing. And the list shortened, and shortened, and finally—was done.

V

There was peace on Earth, and now, in an assembly room whose rows of tables were placarded with the names of half-a-hundred nations met in conclave, the men of good will sat behind their microphones, fussing with the simultaneous-translation headsets over their ears, and whispering to their assistants as they shuffled their papers. Most of all, they kept a careful watch on the other men of good will, who were staring back suspiciously.

United States Delegate Hiram Blonger whispered to the assistant on his left. "All set?"

The assistant nodded. "I've talked to everybody who counts. They're our boys, and they know what's good for them. They'll vote with us right down the line."

Blonger smiled confidently, and the Council President rapped his gavel almost on cue. The preliminary buzzing in the room died down, and the men of good will came to attention.

"Well, here we go for the good old U. S. A.," Blonger whispered to the assistant on his left.

"For the good old organization, yes, sir," the assistant answered

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covertly. He and Blonger exchanged knowing smiles.

Blonger held his smile, letting it turn into a simple, pleased expression on the outside, but savoring its hidden satisfaction in his mind. The fiction of nations and nationalism might continue to exist, but from now on it was the organization that was boss. Of everything.

A telephone blinked, and the assistant on Blonger's right picked up the receiver. He listened for a moment, said, "All right," and hung up. He touched Blonger's sleeve.

"He's dead," he said simply.

Blonger nodded, the smile going almost out of bounds. Finis for the assassin.

Interesting phenomenon, that man. Had he seriously expected that he'd be allowed to live, once he'd completed his task and tied his shadow to the vulnerable shell of another human body?

This time, death was not being cheated. This time, the dangerous dupe had been killed by a gentle reduction of the oxygen available to his borrowed bloodstream. Exit for the super-shadow, and if a weak, quite ordinary shadow lingered somewhere to protest its betrayal, what did it matter? It would be gone forever in a few days.

Blonger returned his attention to the delegate of a minor country who was indulging a frustrated yearning for power by talking at interminable length on a correspondingly minor point.

Suddenly the assistant on his right stiffened for a moment, and his eyes filled with pain. Then he shook himself briefly, a new expression coming into his face. He touched Blonger's sleeve again.

Blonger swung his head around impatiently. "Yes?"

"You forgot the gun."

"What gun?" Blonger asked in annoyance.

"I couldn't very well bring it back with me—even if I'd been as stupid as that."

"Stetten!"

The assistant shook his head. "Stetten's dead," he said with a faint undertone of mockery.

For an instant Blonger seemed on the verge of a heart attack. His lips turned faintly blue, and his fingertips became as cold as ice. "What do you want?"

The assistant smiled. "I'll tell you as we go along. And don't try to have me killed again. I'll just pick up the gun and hunt myself a new body. I might even pick *yours.*"

Blonger tried to force air down his constricted throat. Perspiration streamed off his face and chest, soaking his collar and shirt, leaking through the fabric of his coat at the armpits.

The delegate of the minor nation sat down, and his place was taken by Comrade Soong.

The assistant nodded at the chunky representative of the people's democracies. "One of yours, isn't he?"

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"The organization's?" Blonger asked in a husky stammer. "Yes."

"Start a war."

"What?"

"You heard me. Insult him. Throw him a set of conditions he'd rather die than accept, if he *were* out for his people's benefit. He won't dare jeopardize himself with the boys back home by not playing it straight."

Blonger shook his head desperately. "I can't. He can't. The organization would kill him."

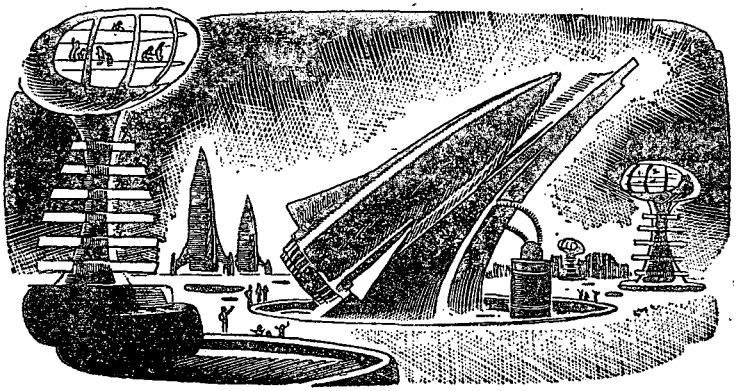
The assistant shrugged. "You can't kill three hundred million people, even if you're the organization. If he dies, somebody will replace him. That somebody probably won't be an organization man. But if he is, he'll die. And so on, until those birds come up with a leader who *will* fight. Either way, I'll get what I want."

Blonger's eyes darted back and forth desperately, as though searching for escape. But he found none.

"Why?" he burst out at last, ignoring the attention he was beginning to draw from neighboring tables. "You knew there was no reward in it for you. You knew all along we'd kill you. You don't want absolute power. Are you out just to stir up trouble? I can't understand you. Why?"

The man at his side shrugged. "I like the thought of people dying because of something I've done. Now, start that war."

The new Stetten smiled triumphantly.



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they are the possessed

by . . . Irving E. Cox, Jr.

It was a terrifying problem. How could Dr. Land lead two lives at once — if dodging fatal accidents made his execution inevitable?

THE WALL TELEPHONE was ringing insistently, and, with a gesture of annoyance, Land interrupted his lecture to answer it. He had no sooner uncradled the receiver than he recognized the voice of the department secretary.

"The winter tests are scheduled for your segment this afternoon, Dr. Land," the secretary said.

"So soon?" There was irritation in Land's voice. "I thought they weren't due here for another week."

"The examiners like to pull a surprise inquiry every now and then," the secretary reminded him. "They catch more Symbs that way. Shall I get a substitute for your afternoon classes?"

"Please," Land urged. "Try Dr. Allan."

"Oh, I'm sorry. The examiners caught Dr. Allan this morning. He was burned an hour ago. I think Dr. Grosse is available."

"He'll do, then."

Dr. Land went back to the lectern, resuming his lecture at the point where he had been interrupted. The forty students crowding the lecture hall wrote notes duti-

A double existence story that takes time out for the most exciting of philosophical brain-twisters — Bishop Berkeley's famed classic insistence that we do not exist at all outside of ourselves — is an event which Irving Cox fans can hardly fail to hail with rejoicing. And since Mr. Cox has appeared in virtually all of the science-fantasy magazines with gratifying regularity, the number who will rejoice may well be legion.

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fully when a gesture or an inflection suggested that Land was making a point which would almost certainly figure prominently in the next written quiz.

Suddenly a kind of awakening washed over Land's mind. That 'phone call from the secretary! He had taken it for granted, and replied with a formula of words. But what the hell had she been talking about? What were the winter tests? And just who were the examiners?

Land's voice trailed off uncertainly. The forty students looked up in bewilderment, pencils poised above their notebooks. Land knew he had to go on with the lecture. It would be courting disaster to let them see that he was afraid. He glanced at the neatly penned notes on the lectern—unmistakably written in his own handwriting. But Land had studiously acquired a Ph. D. in physics. Why should he be lecturing on the Victorian Romantic Poets?

He floundered on, reading from the notes, terror prickling the base of his skull. He observed with consternation that the students were whispering among themselves. He couldn't allow them to think he was frightened because of the winter tests. He knew that he must not—without understanding how he had come into possession of the knowledge. He tried desperately to make his voice seem self-assured. But he was trapped by the unfamiliar subject matter.

At long last a bell clanged in the corridor. The students snapped their notebooks shut, and filed dutifully out of the lecture hall. The instant Land found himself alone he dropped into one of the empty chairs, unaccountably exhausted.

He felt as if he had suddenly become aware of himself, of the integrated life pattern of an individual for the first time in his life. This self was real in every way, but it bore no relationship to what he had come to regard as objective reality. He was a professor of physics; but now he lectured on English Literature. He had never heard of the examiners or the tests.

No, that wasn't strictly true. This other awareness existed as a fragile shadow in his mind, almost blotted out by the substance of the life he remembered. It was as if he were two people, simultaneously existing in two different universes. The shadow was a tormenting mockery of the larger reality, like the aftertaste of a nightmare.

Land heard a soft scratching at the door. As he walked across the lecture hall, a tiny, plastic card appeared beneath the lintel. Abruptly he jerked the door open but the hall outside was empty. He picked up the card. Lettered crudely, it read: *Your guess is right. You're a Symb now. If you need help, see Jeager.*

He held the card in his hand, staring at it stupidly. Should "Symb" have conveyed some sort of meaning to him? The shadow reality gave Land an affirmative answer. But it was an emotional re-

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sponse without motivation. And just who was Jeager? What sort of help was Land likely to need?

The plastic card felt warm in his fingers, and suddenly as he stared it burst into flame. The tiny feather of black ash danced toward the floor. Land began to laugh, but after a moment he regained control of himself, choking back his hysteria with a determined effort of will.

There was a clatter of voices in the corridor. He opened the door again. A squad of Marines, wearing asbestos face masks and carrying portable flame-throwers, was breaking open the door of Dr. Allan's office. Students and an occasional professor walked past them in the corridor, but no one paid the slightest attention to what was going on.

After the Marines had broken open Allan's door, they turned their flame-throwers on every combustible object in the room. Fire snaked up the window curtains, while books from the ceiling-high shelves showered a rain of flaming ash upon the floor.

Land was shaken by a sudden, uncontrollable rage. He ran down the hall, ordering the Marines to stop. A handful of students watched him with horror, but the Marines ignored his order until he jerked one of them away from the door, and tried to knock the flame-thrower from the man's hand. Then the soldier jabbed his fist brutally into Land's stomach, and went right on with his business of destruction.

Gasping for breath, Land staggered back against the corridor wall. A painful unconsciousness pulsed on the fringe of his mind, but he fought it back as he slid down into a sitting position. Students crowded around him. Their voices made a shrill jangle of sound, like a phonograph record played at twice its normal speed. Gradually Land became aware that a stranger was questioning him.

"You feel a personal concern for Dr. Allan. Is that it? You are required to answer me, sir."

"This wanton destruction of property—"

"You know the Symb Law, Dr. Land. This must be done to protect the rest of us." Unceremoniously the stranger jerked open Land's coat and took out his wallet, flipping through the identification cards. "Your segment is up for examination this afternoon, fortunately. If that weren't the case, I'd put through a special on you at once."

One of the students cried, "Land's gone Symb, too!"

Another added, "You can't turn him loose!"

They came closer. Land dragged himself to his feet, backing away from their angry, frightened faces. A co-ed followed him, trying to claw his face with her scarlet nails. Others tore at his clothing. With difficulty the inquisitor restored order.

"He may be Symb," the man said crisply to the mob. "In fact, he undoubtedly is. But you students

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know the law. No one is guilty without an examination."

Reluctantly the mob drew away. As they pushed past Land, one of them slipped a folded paper into his hand. As soon as he was alone he read it. *Don't be a fool. Find Jeager. Allan refused, and he was burned. Don't forget that.*

The note, like the plastic card, almost instantly burst into flame and vanished. Land clenched his fists. Find Jeager! How? Where? The name meant nothing. Nothing that was happening to him made sense.

In bitter despair and confusion Land left the classroom building, and walked across the campus—the familiar ground where he had worked for nearly twenty years. Every detail was a part of the reality that had awakened so shatteringly in the lecture hall. It was this other thing—the examiners and the burning, the Symbs and Jeager—that was new. A mad dream—an impossible nightmare.

The bell in the tower of the administration building began to toll the noon hour. Land turned toward the Student Union, where he had always eaten lunch. A metal rack beside the entrance displayed the morning newspapers. Land picked one up, and glanced at the first page with a kind of fearful curiosity.

At first the news stories seemed completely to confirm the universe he thought he remembered. The names of nations and statesmen, the political issues and the comic strips—everything was familiar. Then, here and there, he began to notice small differences. Crisp reports on the number of Symbs captured by the examiners and burned, and occasional weird spellings—Philadelphia begun with an initial *F*, Chicago with an *Sh*.

He folded the newspaper under his arm, and entered the Student Union. The crowded dining room on the right was familiar and unchanged. But the lobby on the left had vanished. In its place was an examination room, and a cement-walled execution cell. Subconscious data from a veiled part of his mind made it possible for him to identify both the room and the cell, although he was sure he had never seen either of them before.

A long line of students and professors moved steadily into the examination room, showing their segment cards to an attendant stationed at the door. The examiners wore white robes and clinical masks. They performed the examinations by running a knife blade across the finger of each testee and inspecting the small wound carefully. Most of the results were negative and when the examiners stamped the segment cards the person was dismissed.

While Land watched, one Symb was turned up—a woman. She screamed in terror when she saw the results of the test, and tried to run. A metal mesh swung down from the ceiling and flung her into the execution cell. Prongs of fire stabbed out from vents in the cement walls, consuming the woman

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while her screams still echoed through the examination room.

No one had lifted a hand to help her. No one had been concerned enough even to watch the grim execution. The whole process had been accepted as a matter of course. Sick with nausea and terror, Land stumbled blindly out of the Student Union and began to run along a campus walk.

Police whistles shrilled behind him. He heard voices ordering him to halt. He ran faster, gasping for breath. Dr. Land was a middle-aged man, by no means in good physical condition. Once he had prided himself on that, for it had seemed to set him apart as a scholar, clearly different from the boneheads who ran the physical education department. His heart began to hammer against his ribs while tiny, glowing spheres danced before his eyes.

A small whisper of reason throbbed somewhere in a dim part of his mind. What he had just seen was obviously a delusion, hysteria caused by overwork. He need only accept that fact, and the nightmare would vanish. But he couldn't quite make himself accept it. The horror was too real, too close.

He saw a military Jeep on the road behind him, and realized with horror that a Marine seated beside the driver was firing at him with a Tommy-gun. Instinctively he darted into the protection of a stand of ornamental shrubs. Brambles tore at his clothing, and brittle branches slashed like many-thonged whips at his face and hands. But for the moment he was safe from his pursuers and, as he emerged from the shrubs, he saw another automobile coming toward him.

The woman who was driving waved her hand at him. Instinctively he knew she would save him, knew she would take him to Jeager. He stumbled toward her, but the additional effort was too much of a strain. He collapsed into a seething, black chaos of unconsciousness.

II

". . . *Dr. Jeager can do so much for you, Dr. Land.*" From nothingness the voice came, first in a whisper and then in a painful boom of sound.

Land opened his eyes. Or had they ever been actually closed? He could only be sure that the film of a dream—he had forgotten its details—had interfered for a moment with his vision.

Land was in a doctor's office. He stood with his back to the door, clinging to the brass knob. A woman held his hand, pleading with him. After a moment he recognized her. She was a nurse employed by the university—Carla Winters. Out of sympathy and compassion she had brought him here to see Jeager. Land had been afraid, and had tried to run away. He remembered that now and felt very foolish.

Smiling sheepishly, Land moved back into the chair beside Jeager's

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desk. "I don't know what came over me," he apologized.

"It happened at the university," Carla Winters explained. "Outside the physics lab. Dr. Land seemed to be under the impression that soldiers were burning the books in Dr. Allan's office."

"Yes, you told me that," Jeager said, his eyes on Land's haggard face. "The delusion is typical enough, I think."

"I'm—I'm insane?" Land asked, in alarmed concern.

"Not at all," Jeager assured him pleasantly. "No more so at least than the rest of us are, in our own individual ways. A delusion is a sort of wall the mind erects to protect the individual ego from an unpleasantness or a frustration. You're an intelligent, educated man, Dr. Land—a professor of physics at the university. Surely you understand that what I say applies to all of us.

"Any cherished belief we hold about ourselves which is not true to other people is actually a delusion. Most are quite harmless. Each of us creates and lives in his own private universe. Fortunately the majority of our private universes are so much alike that the common similarities are generally considered to be objective fact."

"Considered to be?" Land asked. "Are you saying that reality is simply a body of delusion accepted by the majority?"

"What else can it be, Dr. Land? No human being has any contact with the world outside himself except through his senses, and the senses are subjective slaves of emotional whims and physical disabilities."

Carla Winters intervened, "Do you think it altogether wise, Dr. Jeager, to—"

"We're dealing with a highly intelligent mind, Miss Winters. Semantic sophistry is often the best approach to an early rapport."

Land resented the fact that they were talking about him as if he were a specimen under a laboratory microscope. He resented Jeager's bland assumption that all men were mad, for that included himself—and Land knew for a certainty now that he was not insane.

He said slowly, "As I understand it, Miss Winters brought me to see you because I'm supposed to be suffering from some sort of pathological self-deception. I need help because my delusion is so different from the common garden variety acceptable to everyone else. I don't remember exactly what I did, but—"

"That often happens, Dr. Land."

"But I suppose the delusion would have seemed real to me?"

"Entirely."

"If all reality is subjective, as you claim it is, how am I to know which was actually real—the delusion you say I had, or the delusion I am living now?"

"To you, Dr. Land, both are equally real. But only this delusion is a reality to the rest of us." Jeager smiled thinly. "Since you must live

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in our physical world, Dr. Land, it would be a convenience, don't you think, to share our common delusion and dispense with your own. I want to help you do that."

"You tell me I'm not mad, Dr. Jeager. Therefore, when we finish this little chat about realities, you'll let me walk out of your office and go back—"

"You've been under such a strain!" Carla Winters put in hastily. "You've worked so hard on that research for the Government, Dr. Land, that you do need a rest. We all realize that now."

"And so you want to pack me off to a sanitarium." Fingers of fear played up and down Land's spine. He arose stiffly from the chair, edging away from Jeager's desk. "Well, I'm not buying it. I'm entirely sane, Dr. Jeager. Nothing's the matter with me, and I don't want a vacation in a booby hatch—" Land sprang toward the door, wrenching it open. "And I don't intend to have one."

He darted down a dimly-lit, tiled corridor. It surprised him that he was in a hospital. He had incorrectly assumed that Jeager's office was in an ordinary professional building. The hospital enormously decreased his chances of escaping, but he was determined not to be confined to a mental institution.

Land heard the drumbeat of footsteps on the tile floor behind him. Over his shoulder he saw four uniformed internes running along the hall. Land darted down a side corridor, dark except for the light blinking behind the letters on a glass call board. Suddenly the pattern of letters changed. Four glared at him from the darkness.

S-Y-M-B

The nightmare flamed full-blown into Land's mind again. He was accused of turning Symb. If the examiners caught him, they would burn him in the execution cell. He screamed the word aloud, and fled blindly from the dancing lights.

At the end of the hall the four internes caught him. Land fought them off, and began to run again. He had almost reached the relative safety of the stairway when he saw Jeager and Carla Winters waiting for him. The nurse held a hypodermic needle in her hand.

Land tried desperately to dart past them, but his foot skidded on the slick, tile floor. He crashed headlong into the glass wall of a nursery. The wall shattered. Flying particles tore at Land's face and hands, and he fell forward into nothingness again—a bleak chaos of unconsciousness.

III

"*. . . Maybe you'll let Jeager help you, now.*"

Painfully Land opened his eyes. He was lying hunched on the seat of an automobile. The woman beside him was driving recklessly through heavy traffic. Horns clattered at them as they raced past intersections against the warning

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lights. In the distance Land heard the insistent moan of a siren, the shrill scream of police whistles. He remembered running from the Student Union. He remembered breaking through the shrubs that tore agonizing wounds in his face and hands.

Apparently this woman had rescued him, and now she was driving him to Jeager. He looked up at the woman's face. It seemed familiar, and after a moment of tormenting uncertainty, he recognized her. Carla Winters!

The rest of the pattern fell into place. The thing that he had once taken for a dream was real. It was this nightmare of Symbs and examiners which was the delusion.

He must have had another attack of madness when he fell through the nursery window in the hospital. He wondered how he had managed to regain his hold on the world of objective reality? Or had he regained it? He had always understood that when a psychotic faced the fact that his delusion was a dream and a snare, the delusion was destroyed. Land willingly admitted the truth to himself, and yet the hidden fear remained: Why?

Cautiously he said to the woman beside him, "You're Carla Winters, aren't you?"

She flashed a smile. "Why, yes, Dr. Land. How did you know?"

"You're the university nurse. You took me to—"

"No, I'm just a student in the school of nursing. I took one of your classes two years ago—Freshman Comp—but I didn't think you'd remember me. I wasn't a very good student."

He said doggedly, "I never taught Composition. I'm a professor of physics."

She negotiated a sharp turn into a narrow street before she replied. "It's quite possible for you to think that, Dr. Land. We often get ourselves confused with the other personality when we first turn Symb."

Admirable, he thought. The delusion had a built-in safety factor to handle every inconsistency. "How do you know I'm a Symb?" he asked.

"A girl in your class reported your confusion during the lecture this morning. That's one of the earliest symptoms. It was probably the moment when you first became convinced that you taught physics instead of literature. The initial Symb invasion is always awkward, you see, for the form of communication has to be individually developed in each case. That's why so many are caught by the blood test. They're not even aware—until it's too late—that the Symb change has taken place. In your case, Dr. Land, your face is all the proof you need."

"You mean that an actual physical change—"

"Dr. Land, not quite ten minutes ago, you ran through a bramble thicket. Your face was cut to ribbons when I picked you up. Feel it now."

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He lifted his hand to his cheek. There was no break in the skin, no wound small or large. This miraculous sort of cure was a bizarre development of the delusion. But how did it fit with actual reality?

The slashing shrubs equated with the flying glass of the broken hospital window; that he knew. He was, in terms of the objective physical world, badly hurt. But for some reason the admission of pain was not a part of his nightmare. His mind had simply blotted it out.

But if his mind had created the delusion for his comfort or amusement, what was the purpose of the strong thread of terror and horror? Why the examiners and the execution cells? Land felt a little ashamed of his creative illogic. If he must go mad, he had a right to expect an intelligent madness modulated by good taste.

Carla Winters pulled the car to a stop in a dark, cluttered alley. She motioned for Land to follow her through a sagging back gate into a ramshackle slum dwelling. Land recognized the area as the oldest part of town, a clutter of dirty and disreputable buildings behind the city hospital.

It interested him that the delusion should have brought him here, when in terms of reality he was somewhere in the hospital that towered above him. How close would the dream come to the reality? When the two coincided, would the nightmare come to an end? He began to feel a detached, clinical interest in his own situation.

The house where Carla Winters took him seemed to be deserted. Dust lay thick on the lower floors. But upstairs in a small room, rather comfortably furnished, Jeager was waiting.

"You're the psychiatrist," Land said when they met. He was determined to state the real facts as he knew them, for he was curious to know how the delusion would shift its pattern to include this new data.

"Psychiatrist?" Jeager shook his head, frowning. "It seems a poor time, Dr. Land, to make jokes."

"The last time I saw you—"

"I was teaching biology at the university. We used to be good friends, Land. That's why I tried so hard to save you when I knew you'd gone Symb."

Jeager said it with such sincerity and such conviction, that Land began to doubt himself. Perhaps the other awareness was the delusion, and this one the reality. How would he know? The other Jeager—the psychiatrist—had said that no man ever saw objective reality, for all data came to him filtered through subjective and physically imperfect senses. Abruptly Land understood what the other Jeager had meant. He was living in two highly organized dream worlds. One was real, in the sense that it was shared by other people. But which world was the shared delusion?

Jeager seemed sympathetic, in-

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telligent and perceptive. Perhaps he held the clue that would show Land how to dissolve one delusion, and believe in the reality of the other. Land sat in a chair facing Jeager, and poured out his story, as he understood it. Jeager and Carla Winters listened with patient interest.

"It's what we all go through," Jeager said. "The Symb colony is attempting to communicate with you, Land. You are naturally reading the data in your own terms. Your Symb was apparently a physicist and you're confused by interpreting the Symb personality as your own."

"What are the Symbs, Jeager?" Land asked in a tense whisper. He was beginning to understand, but he wanted to be sure.

"You've forgotten that, too?" Jeager seemed pleased. "You've made a remarkable identification with your colony, Land. At this rate you should develop top-level communication within a month."

"But I don't understand any of it—the examination or the execution cells or the persecution. Why have I been made an outcast because I'm called a Symb?"

Carla Winters twisted her hands together. "I'm frightened, Dr. Jeager. This is what the others said would happen."

"Don't be a fool," Jeager snapped. "Land will remember fast enough. The initial communication has temporarily disturbed his memory pattern. It's no more serious than that."

Jeager turned toward Land. "The hysteria started about twenty years ago, Dr. Land. Scores of people all over the world suddenly began to think they were possessed by new personalities. At first we considered it a kind of mass madness. But certain associated phenomena called for a different interpretation. This, for example."

Jeager seized a knife from the table and stabbed a deep cut in Land's arm. Land cried out instinctively, and closed his hand over the wound. But there was no wound. There was no blood even, no feeling of pain.

"You understand why the condition began to interest the medical profession, Dr. Land. The madmen who claimed to be possessed were beyond any sort of physical harm. I could have shot you through the heart with a bullet, and the results would be the same. About the time that science became genuinely interested in the condition, the first of a number of remarkable inventions was patented by some of the madmen. They said that the other person inside them had shown them how to create the new gadgets.

"This frightened a good many people. They began to feel subtly inferior to a handful of lunatics—and inferiority is one frustration the average person can't abide. All over the world people began to persecute friends and neighbors who showed signs of being possessed. Almost overnight the asylums and sanitariums were full. It took about

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two years before science stumbled upon the cause of the insanity. The feeling of being possessed was, in fact, literally true.

"The earth had been invaded by a virus which established intelligent colonies in the human nervous system, feeding upon human blood. A classic example of symbiotic existence, with man as the host. In time the two personalities can achieve communication and live side by side in one body, mutually benefiting each other. You see, the virus has an enormous store of data which is available to the host and in addition gives the host almost complete physical immunity from any sort of harm. The only way the virus and host can both be destroyed is with fire.

"At the beginning we weren't certain of this co-operative symbiosis, simply because so much time must elapse before the virus can achieve communication. At first science suggested the hypothesis that the human personality had been totally destroyed. In other words, the person possessed became a kind of zombie, housing an invading disease.

"The world reacted to this idea with the sort of hysteria you've seen. The one way to identify the virus—even before the individual knows he is possessed—is through a wound. If it heals immediately, that individual is a symbiotic host. A Symb, as we call them in popular slang. Fire is the only way we have to destroy the Symb. The execution cells and the examining committees follow as a matter of course."

Land asked, "How is it you know the truth, Dr. Jeager?"

"Symbiotic research was my field. I realized that I was possessed nearly a month before I had to face the winter examinations. I also knew I hadn't changed, that my personality was still intact. But I couldn't have convinced an examining committee. The mass hysteria has gone too far. So I disappeared."

He stared at Land steadily for a moment, then continued: "I wanted to see what would develop if I allowed the possession to run its course. As a result, I've had the unusual pleasure of establishing communication with my virus colony. Since then I've devoted all of my time and energy to rescuing others, and giving them the same chance to know themselves. Someday we may have a large enough backlog of sanity to make the rest of the world listen to reason."

"More probably," Land said gloomily, "we'll track down every host and wipe out the virus entirely."

Carla Winters laughed. "That's impossible, Dr. Land."

"We're all possessed," Jeager explained. "It takes time for the colony to grow to the point where it can make itself known—years in some cases. In another generation every child will be born with a fully developed symbiotic possession. When we all begin to register positive results in the examinations, the

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executions will become absurd. The only point we're concerned with now is our own immediate survival."

Land clenched his fists. "But to let this hysteria go on when it's so pointless, so futile—" He broke off. If this were no more than a dream, why should he become so excited about it, so emotionally involved? Yet it was difficult to remain aloof, clinically detached, as he had planned.

"What else can we do?" Carla Winters asked hopelessly, "beyond saving one or two people when we can. If we try anything on a larger scale, we'll betray ourselves."

"Who gives the examinations?" Land asked.

"Local medical boards appointed by the municipal hospitals and the medical associations. The permanent examination rooms are in the city hospital."

"Are the examiners tested too?"

"Theoretically, yes. In actual practice, I don't suppose it happens very often. There are too many other cases that have to be processed."

"You said all of us were affected by the virus. If we could prove to a local board—"

"I see your point," Jeager agreed. "Carla and I have sometimes wondered about it ourselves. It would involve a tremendous risk, and we might gain nothing. Of course, if one local board could be made to see the truth, it would eventually influence the others."

"It isn't worth it," Carla Winters said firmly. "Suppose we could force them to take the tests. We have no way of being sure that their individual virus colonies have grown mature enough to show positive test results."

"But Jeager said all men were hosts!" Land repeated.

"The colony must grow before its separate intelligence awakens. The rate of growth depends upon the maturity of the host."

"We could force the awakening," Land suggested, "by injecting some of our blood into their veins."

Jeager pulled nervously at his lower lip while he studied Land's face. After a silence, he asked, "Is that idea yours, Land, or does it come from your other self?"

"I—I'm not sure." Land was surprised and puzzled when he added, without conscious volition, "The virus was speaking. The theory is sound. The smallest portion of your blood will serve as a catalyst to awaken an entire colony."

"Then it is worth trying!" Carla cried. "My other self tells me the same thing. A beginning here wouldn't be much—but it might help jog the rest of the world back to sanity."

"We'll need four or five others to work with us. You round them up, Carla, and bring them here."

In less than thirty minutes Jeager's small band of the possessed were ready to invade the city hospital. One by one they crossed the service yard and entered a supply

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room. Jeager rang for the automatic freight elevator. In silence they crowded aboard.

When the grille slid open Land saw a hospital corridor that was familiar. A question he had asked himself came again to his mind: how would this delusion arrange to twist its course in order to bring him to the point of physical contact with the other? Now he had the answer, for they were walking down the tile-floored hall toward the glass wall of the nursery. The wall he had shattered in his frantic effort to escape. Only there was a difference. This time there was no nursery behind the wall, but an examination room and an execution cell.

Land felt a sense of failure, of approaching catastrophe. But when he tried to speak a warning, the words died on his lips. What could he say that would have meaning to the others? He still did not know which hallucination was objectively real.

Jeager's conspirators pushed through swinging doors into the examination room. They had come at a fortunate time, during a lull in the testing. Only the three examiners were in the room. They arose, in alarm, to face the invaders.

The examiners were seized and gagged. Jeager slashed a wound in his arm and with the same knife he made cross-cuts in the wrists of the three squirming men. After he had pressed the wounds together, they healed with miraculous speed. The examiners went limp. They knew what had happened. Jeager ordered the gags removed.

"Now you understand," he said quietly.

"You've infected us!"

"It's hardly an infection. Are you any different now than you were? Is the *you* that you recognize as yourself changed?"

"How would we know that? The infection killed us as human beings."

"That's unadulterated rot. You've seen the evidence with your own eyes. What other proof do you need? Give the virus a chance to—"

"To spread from us to others?" one examiner cried in self-righteous terror. "To destroy others until there is no free man left alive anywhere on the earth?"

Another screamed, "I still have my initiative as a human being. You haven't destroyed it all—not yet." He sprang toward the execution cell and jerked down the alarm arm.

Jeager cried a warning as the wire mesh swung down from the ceiling. The examiners were willingly caught, martyrs to their own hysteria. Jeager's men fought the net as it swept them toward the execution cell, where the searing swords of fire were already darting from the wall vents.

Land never knew how many escaped. He responded instinctively when he heard Jeager's warning by sprinting toward the door. He might have made it, but his foot

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struck the edge of the examiners' table, and he fell in a headlong sprawl. As he struck the wall the glass shattered and in agonized horror he felt the sharp particles tearing at his face and hands.

So this is how a dream dies. It was his last conscious thought, tinged with bitterness and perhaps regret, as he fell into a seething, blank unconsciousness.

IV

"... Dr. Jeager can do so much for you, Dr. Land."

Slowly the nothingness dissolved. The scattered clouds of light solidified into tangible realities and Land recognized the bleak, sterile walls of a hospital room. There were flowers and a newspaper on a metal nightstand by his bed and he was lying beneath crisp white sheets. But there was a strap under the sheets, tying him to the bed. And there were bars on the window.

A madhouse, then. Jeager had said it might be necessary. The cure must have been successful, Land decided, because he had a visitor—Carla Winters. There was no mistaking which Carla Winters she was, for she was wearing her nurse's uniform. The nightmare of examiners and Symbs had been the delusion, then. He could be sure of that at last.

Or could he? The issue seemed confused, because he now remembered both worlds in equal detail. Was he a physicist or a professor of literature? He had no way of knowing, for the subject matter of both fields crowded his mind.

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"We just brought you in, Dr. Land. Half an hour, maybe. I wanted to stay with you until the sedative wore off."

"Didn't I have a bad accident in the hall?"

"You fell through a plate glass window, Dr. Land. Glass was everywhere! You might have killed yourself. I was sure your face had been cut to ribbons. But when we picked you up, you weren't even scratched."

Because he was possessed by a symbiotic virus? A cold horror washed over his mind. This, then, was the essence of madness—to live in two worlds, and not to know which was reality. Whatever the consequences, he *had* to know, one way or the other.

He saw the newspaper on the nightstand, and asked Carla Winters to hand it to him. He tried to move into a sitting position, but the strap across his hips made that impossible. Awkwardly he turned the pages of the newspaper, holding it horizontally above his eyes. There were the spellings he knew—Chicago with a *C*, Philadelphia with *Ph*. There were the familiar names in sports and politics, the commercial products he had known all his life.

But if the symbiotic virus was the delusion, why hadn't he been hurt

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when he broke the glass window? A lucky accident, perhaps. Suddenly he remembered how Jeager had tested the virus. Land could duplicate that. Then he would know the truth, finally and irrevocably.

"Do you have your compact with you, Miss Winters?" he asked.

"I think so." She felt in the pocket of her uniform.

"I want to look at my face."

"I told you, Dr. Land, you weren't hurt." Then she smiled indulgently and gave him the compact. "I suppose it will ease your mind, if you make sure of that for yourself."

As soon as he had the compact in his hand, he opened it and smashed the mirror against the metal headboard. Glass particles rained on his pillow. Carla Winters tried to snatch the compact from him, but when she saw him reaching for the largest fragment of glass she backed away, screaming for an attendant.

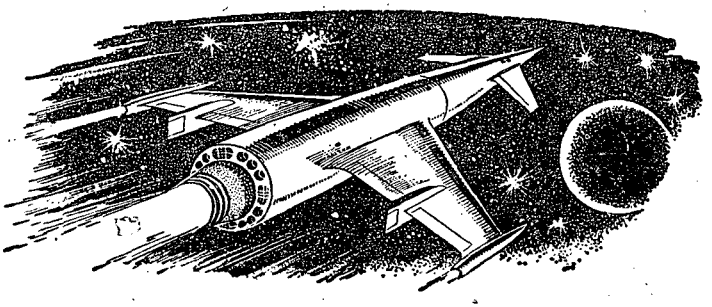
Land held the jagged edge above his wrist vein. He had ten seconds, perhaps less, before they would come and tie his hands in a straight jacket. But ten seconds was all the time he needed to learn the truth. The test had to be made.

Still he hesitated. Terror paralyzed his muscles. He was afraid to resolve the dilemma, for he suddenly realized that if he proved himself a symbiotic host, then both delusions would be logical realities. He could never have survived the manifest absurdity of living in two objectively real universes.

He turned his face upon the pillow, his body shaking with bitter sobs.

In a moment it was over. Two husky internes pulled him into an upright position. He felt the pinprick of a hypodermic in his upper arm. The emptiness of drugged sleep crowded into his mind. But just before his consciousness flickered out, he heard one of the internes speak to Carla Winters.

"This guy sure has the luck, Miss Winters. He was burrowing his face in all that broken glass, and there's not a scratch on him. *Not a scratch!*"



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exiles of tomorrow

by . . . Marion Zimmer Bradley

Into the brightly youthful fabric of Carey Kennaird's life was woven the dark and hateful tyranny of the world his birth had shattered.

"A VERY STRANGE thing happened when I was born," Carey Kennaird told me.

He paused and refilled his wine glass, looking at me with a curious appraisal in his young and very blue eyes. I returned his glance as casually as I could, wondering why he had suddenly decided to confide in me.

I had known Carey Kennaird for only a few weeks. We were the most casual of acquaintances; a word in the lobby of our hotel, a cup of coffee in a lunchroom he liked, mugs of beer in the quiet back room of the corner bar. He was intelligent and I had enjoyed his conversation. But until now it had consisted entirely of surface commonplaces. Today, he seemed to be opening up a trifle.

He had volunteered the information, unasked, that he was the son of a well-known research physicist, and that he was in Chicago to look for his father who had disappeared mysteriously a week or so before. Young Kennaird seemed oddly unworried about his father's plight. But I was pleased at the way his reserve appeared to be dropping.

Surely only the author of JACKIE SEES A STAR, *that bright, unforgettable story of a child's tempestuous yearning, could have ventured so boldly into the equally tempestuous vortex of time travel, and emerged with a narrative as wholly convincing as this. For Marion Bradley has the shining conviction that youth must forever remain central and ger[illegible]e to Time's unfolding, even when mirrored in the tragic destiny of a Carey Kennaird.*

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As I say, Carey Kennaird had a casual way with him, and he puzzled me. He did not, somehow, seem emotionally in sympathy with the hectic tempo of the rushed age in which he had grown up.

"Well," I told him noncommittally, "childhood memories often make quite normal events seem strange. What was it?"

The appraisal in his eyes was franker now. "Mr. Grayne, do you ever read science-fiction?"

"I'm afraid not," I told him. "At least, only very occasionally."

He looked a little crestfallen. "Oh—well, do you know anything about the familiar science-fiction concept of traveling in time?"

"A little." I finished my drink, wishing the waiter would bring us another bottle of wine. "It's supposed to involve some quite staggering paradoxes, I believe. I'm thinking of the man who goes back in time and kills his own grandfather?"

He looked disgusted. "That's at best a trite layman's idea!"

"Well, I'm a layman," I said genially. The arrogance of young people always strikes me as being pathetic rather than insulting. I did not think young Kennaird could have been more than nineteen. Twenty, perhaps. "Now then, young fellow, don't tell me you've actually invented a time machine!"

"Good Lord, no!" The denial was so laughingly spontaneous that I had to laugh with him. "No, just an idea that interests me. I don't really believe there's much paradox involved in time-travel at all."

He paused, his eyes still on my face. "See here, Mr. Grayne, I'd like to—well, do you mind listening to something rather fantastic? I'm not drunk, but I've got a good reason for wanting to confide in you. You see, I know a great deal about you, really."

I wasn't surprised. In fact, I'd been prepared for just such a statement. I grinned a strained grin at the boy. "No, go ahead," I told him. "I'm interested." I leaned back in my chair, preparing to listen.

You see, I knew what he was going to say.

II

Ryn Kenner sat in his cell, his head buried in his hands.

"Oh, God—" he muttered to himself, over and over.

There were so many unpredictable risks involved. Even though he had spent three years coaching Cara, teaching her to guard against every possible contingency, he still might fail. If only he could have eliminated the psychic block. But that, of course, was the most necessary risk of all.

Sometimes, in spite of his humanitarian training, Ryn Kenner thought the old, primitive safeguards had been better. Executing murderers, locking maniacs up in cells was certainly better than exiling men in this horrible new way. Ryn Kenner knew that he would

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have preferred to die. Two or three times he had even thought of slashing his wrists with a razor before the Exile. Once he had actually set a razor against his right wrist, but his early training had been too strong for him. Even the word *suicide* could set off a mental complex of quivering nerve reactions impossible to control.

The tragedy, Kenner thought despondently, resided in the paradox that civilization had become too enlightened. There had been a time when men had thought that traveling backward in time would upset the framework of events and change the future. But it had been a manifestly mistaken idea, for in this year, 2543 A.D., the whole past had already occurred, and the present moment contained within itself the entire past, including whatever rectifying attempts time-travelers had made in that past.

Kenner shivered as he realized that his own acts had all occurred in the past. He, Ryn Kenner, had already died—six centuries before.

Time-travel—the perfect, the most humane way of banishing criminals! He had heard all the arguments which sophistry could muster. The strong individualists were clearly misfits in the enlightened twenty-sixth century. For their own good, they should be exiled to eras psychologically congenial to them. A good many of them had been sent to California in the year 1849. They thus took a one-way trip to an era where murder was not a crime, but a social necessity, the respectable business of a gentleman. Religious fanatics were exiled to the First Dark Ages, where they could not disturb the tranquil materialism of the present century; too aggressive atheists, to the twenty-third century.

Kenner rose and began to pace his cell, which was a prison in fact, if not in appearance. Outside the wide window spread a spacious view of Nyor Harbor, and the room was luxuriously furnished. He knew, however, that if he stepped a foot past the lines which had been drawn around the door, he would be instantly overpowered by a powerful sleeping gas. He had tried it once, with almost disastrous results.

This hour of high decision was his last in the twenty-sixth century. In fifty minutes, in his own personal, subjective time from now, he would be somewhere in the twentieth century, the era to which his rashness had condemned him when he had been apprehended by the psycho police while attempting to re-discover the fabulous atomic isotopes. And he wouldn't remember enough to get back. He would be permitted to keep all his training—all his knowledge, and memory—but there would be a fatal reservation.

Never, for the rest of his life, would Kenner be able to remember that he had come from the past. For the three weeks during which he had been confined to the cell the radiant suggestor had been steadily

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beaming at his brain. No defense his mind could devise had sufficed to stay its slow inroads into his thought.

Already his brain was beginning to grow fuzzy and he knew that the time was short. He drew a long breath, hearing steps in the corridor, and the whistle which meant the hypnotic gas was being momentarily turned off.

He stopped pacing.

Abruptly the door opened, and a psycho-supervisor entered the cell. Framed in the radiance behind him—

"Cara!" Kenner almost sobbed, and ran forward to catch his wife in his arms, and hold her with hungry violence. She cried softly against him. "Rhy, Ryn, it won't be long—"

The supervisor's face was compassionate. "Kenner," he said, "you may have twenty minutes alone with your wife. You will be unsupervised." The door closed softly behind him.

Kenner led Cara to a seat. She tried to hold back her tears, looking at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Ryn, darling, I thought you might have—"

"Hush, Cara," he whispered. "They may be listening. Just remember everything I've told you. You *mustn't* risk being sent to a different year. You already know what to do."

"I'll—find you," she promised.

"Let's not talk about it," Kenner urged gently. "We haven't long. Grayne promised he'd look after you until—"

"I know. He's been good to me while you were here."

The twenty minutes didn't seem long. The supervisor pretended not to notice while Cara clung to Kenner in a last agony of farewell. Ryn brushed the tears away from her eyes, softly.

"See you in nineteen forty-five, Cara," he whispered, and let her go.

"It's a date darling," were her last words before she followed the supervisor out of the prison. Kenner, in the last few moments remaining to him, before he sank into sleep again, desperately tried to marshal what little knowledge he possessed about the twentieth century.

His brain felt dark now, and oppressed, as if someone had wrapped his mind in smothering folds of wool. Dimly he knew that when he woke, his prison would be yet unbuilt. And yet, all the rest of his life he would be in prison—the prison of a mind that would never let him speak the truth.

III

"—and of course, this hypothetical psychic block would also contain provision prohibiting marriage with anyone from the past," Carey Kennaird finished. "It would naturally be inconvenient for children to be born of the time exiles. But if my hypothetical man from the future should actually find the wife

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he'd arranged to have exiled with him, there'd be no psychic block against marrying *her*." He paused, staring at me steadily. "Now, what would happen to the kid?"

My own glass stood empty. I signalled to the waiter, but Kennaird shook his head. "Thanks, I've had enough."

I paid for the wine. "Suppose we walk to the hotel together, Kennaird?" I said. "You've got a fascinating theory there, my boy. It would make a fine plot for a science-fiction novel. Are you a writer? Of course, what happened to the boy—" we passed together into the blinding sunlight of the Chicago Loop, "—would be the climax of your story."

"It would," Kennaird agreed.

We crossed the street beneath the thundering El trains, and stood in front of Marshall Fields while Carey lit a cigarette.

"Smoke?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No thanks. You said you had a reason for confiding in me, young man. What is it?"

He looked at me curiously. "I think you know, Mr. Grayne. You weren't born in the Twentieth Century. I was, of course. But you're like Dad and Cara. You're a time exile, too, aren't you?

"I know you can't *say* anything, because of the psychic block. But you don't have to deny it. That's how Dad told me. He made me read science-fiction. Then he made me ask him leading questions—and just answered yes or no." Young Kennaird paused. "I don't have the psychic block. Dad was trying to help me discover the time-travel device. He came up to Chicago, and disappeared. But I'm on the right track now. I'm sure of it. I think Dad got back somehow."

Even though I'd known what he was going to say, I swallowed hard.

"Something very strange *did* happen when you were born," I said. "You put a peculiar strain on the whole framework of time. It was something that never should have happened, because of—" my voice faltered, "the psychic block against marrying anyone from the past."

Carey Kennaird looked at me intently. "Hard to talk about the psychic block, isn't it? Dad never could."

I nodded without speaking. We climbed the hotel steps together. "Come up to my room," I urged. "We'll talk it over. You see, Carey—I'm going to call you that—Kenner used to be my friend."

"I wonder," Carey said, "If Dad got home to the twenty-sixth century."

"He did."

Carey stared. "Mr. Grayne! Is he all right?"

Regretfully, I shook my head. The elevator boy let us off on the fourth floor. I wondered if he, too, were an exile. I wondered how many people in Chicago were exiles, sullen behind the mask of a mental block which clamped a gag

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on their lips when they tried to speak the truth.

I wondered how many men, and how many women, were living such a lie, day in, and day out, lonely, miserable exiles from their own tomorrow, victims of a fate literally worse than death. Small wonder they would do *anything* to avoid such a fate.

My door closed behind us. While Carey stared, wide-eyed, at the device which loomed darkly in one corner of the room, I went to my desk, and removed the shining disk. I walked straight up to him. "This is from your father," I told him. "Look at it carefully."

He accepted it eagerly, his eyes blazing with excitement, sensing at once that it had come from the twenty-sixth century.

He died instantly.

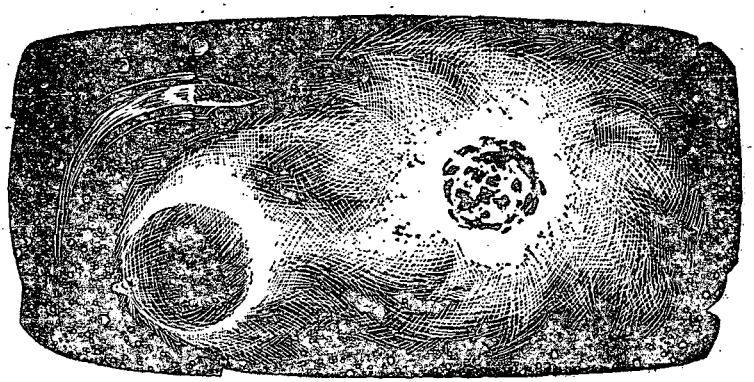
Hating my work, hating time-travel, hating the whole chain of events, which had made me an instrument of justice, I stepped into the device that would return me to the twenty-sixth century.

Carey Kennaird had told the truth. A very strange thing *had* happened at his birth. Like an extra electron bombarding an unstable isotope, he had broken the link that held the framework of time together. His birth had started a chain reaction that had ended, for me, a week before in 2556, when Kenner and Cara had reappeared in the twenty-sixth century and been murdered in a panic by the psycho-supervisors. I, already condemned to time exile, had won a free pardon for my work, a commutation of my sentence to a light reprimand and the loss of my position. It was ugly work and I hated it, for Kenner and Cara *had* been my friends. But I had no freedom of choice. Anything was better than exile into time.

Anything, anything.

Besides, it had been necessary.

It isn't lawful for children to be born before their parents.



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translation

by . . . James Blish

It was the strangest time capsule ever discovered—a relic of a lunatic race. Or was the shoe just a little on the other foot?

THAT QU'ULQU'UN'S luck in scavenging the Sol system had been exceedingly poor was evident at once to the Curator of Artifacts. The way the spaceman's wings drooped as he entered the museum chamber was graphic, especially because the flight from Qu'ulqu'un's nest to the building was short.

"You've brought me bad news," the Curator said.

Qu'ulqu'un's palps vibrated wryly beneath his huge compound eyes. "Bad enough, I'm afraid," he said. "But how did you know?"

The Curator explained. "It's very odd," he added pensively. "If I were a poet, I should say that we express disappointment in apparent fatigue of our flight muscles, because those muscles were the last to develop, and so act in the body-image as symbols of our aspirations."

"But that's nonsense. The flight-muscles didn't develop last, either in the evolutionary or the embryological sense."

"Of course, of course," the Curator said. "What is poetry, after

Increasingly during the past few months we've welcomed for the first time to our pages really big-name writers at their most imaginative—the kind of material no editor ever gets in completely satisfying abundance at any one time. We've been luckier than most editors, we think, perhaps because our guiding policy has been so consistently untrammeled. Here is James Blish with a story above and outside the ordinary, most engagingly told.

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all, but a highly organized form of lying? But let's get to the facts."

The curator's palps grew stiff.

"Let's," Qu'ulqu'un said, with evident relief. He seemed to be quite unaware that his relief had been engineered by the Curator, by the simple device of making an art-form, with all its archaic and immoral overtones, seem momentarily the central subject of the conversation. "I don't suppose you're interested in the astronomical data and so on; anyhow, all that's in the report. To get to the point at once, there was only one planet in the system which had had any intelligent life on it—"

"*Had* had?"

"That is correct, unhappily," Qu'ulqu'un said. "The dominant race there had killed itself off. We've seen such things before. In this case, it was easily the most thorough job I've ever encountered, even in the literature. It was so thorough as to leave almost nothing to scavenge."

"I don't see how that could be done," the Curator admitted.

"Nuclear explosions of the thermal type. Theoretically they can't take place on a body as small as a planet, but these people are absolute hell on theory, as you'll see in a minute; with them, the impossible evidently was routine. Anyhow, they didn't leave us any monuments of their civilization but shallow saucers of glass, many of them with areas of a hundred square miles and more. And nearly everything in the intervening countrysides had been burned off."

The Curator expelled air from his spiracles in a multi-toned, discordant whistle. "But surely," he said, "somebody must have survived — in underground shelters, or—"

"Nobody," Qu'ulqu'un said positively. "There is no air-breathing life of any kind left on that planet. For one thing, it would suffocate. There's only about three per cent of oxygen left in the air there now, and most of that seems to have been liberated from the sea since the holocaust. Judging by the rate of return from the sea, we figure that the original oxygen content of the air must have been nearly half that of our own planet—about twenty per cent. But when they burned that world, they *burned* it—the air there is charged with carbon dioxide now, and there's so marked a greenhouse effect that some of the smaller lakes boil every noon.

"And that's not all. The air's not only hot and suffocating—it's actively poisonous. It's full of cobalt-sixty."

"Which is what? I'm no physicist, Qu'ulqu'un."

"It's a radioisotope of cobalt—a beta-minus emitter with a three hundred thousand electron-volt punch and a habit of spraying gamma rays in all directions. It has a half-life five point three years—"

"What's a year?" the Curator said. "You're talking over my head."

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"Sorry. It's a measure of time these people used—one revolution of their planet around Sol. I've gotten in the habit of using the term because we used the half-life cobalt-sixty to date the holocaust in their time. Anyhow, the place is poison. The few artifacts we managed to bring back for you had to be thoroughly decontaminated before we even dared to go into the same chamber with them."

"But," the Curator said, "that must have been an accident. Even warring parties wouldn't contaminate the atmosphere both sides had to breathe."

"It was no accident. They apparently put cobalt casings on their bombs with full knowledge of what would happen. Why, nobody knows. The physics of the operation is clear enough, but the reasons—we don't even have a hint."

"And so . . . suicide. A thorough job, as you said."

"Thorough and inexplicable," Qu'ulqu'un said, clicking his mandibles nervously. "The few artifacts we picked up near the blast areas came to light in a way that suggests something almost monstrous. These people were highly conscious of the future, they thought of it almost as a time as real as the present. For instance: the manuscript I'm going to give you was found in a metal case that had been imbedded *in the cornerstone of a ruin!*"

"A time-capsule society!" the Curtor exclaimed. "But Qu'ulqu'un, that's impossible. Such cultures classically are child-worshippers, and never even develop warfare—let alone exterminate themselves!"

His palps quivered visibly.

Qu'ulqu'un opened and furled his wings, then reached beneath his thorax and produced a rectangular box of anodized aluminum. "There's the manuscript," he said. "As you'll see, it was a little charred by heat, even though it was in a neon atmosphere when our X-ray team found it. But it's not too brittle to handle; we embedded the pages in plastic right away."

"Good. Hm. More paradox. Look here, Qu'ulqu'un, this is no manuscript. It's a mechanical copy. They knew how to reproduce information by mass methods; that doesn't make sense, either. The development of such a process invariably is followed by universal literacy and the settlement of tribal conflicts."

"Not on Sol III, it wasn't," Qu'ulqu'un said. "To tell you the truth, I was glad to get off that planet. The desolation was depressing enough, but it was even worse to be reminded constantly of the people who caused it. Evidently everything we ever learned about the behavior of intelligent creatures failed to apply to them."

"I can scarcely credit that, still," the Curator said thoughtfully. "The evidence is rather on the scrappy side, after all. These paradoxes may be just on the surface. Well, let's see what the translator makes of this document—that may un-

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ravel the mystery in short order. Obviously it was important."

He soared across the chamber, to return presently with all six limbs towing a bulky apparatus which rolled across the smooth floor on ball-bearing casters. As soon as he had brought this to rest beside his couch, he settled down once more and carefully fed the alien artifact into a small port on the near side of the mechanism.

"A translator?" Qu'ulqu'un echoed interestedly. "This is new to me."

"It's been a dream of ours for a long time," the Curator said, calibrating the instrument while he spoke. "Always in the realm of possibility theoretically, but the practical problems were enormous. What we wanted was an instrument which would automatically translate one language into another —no matter what two languages were involved."

"It sounds impossible to me," the other said.

"It shouldn't. After all, the basic principles of communication are the same everywhere. Either your language is similar in structure to the facts it wants to communicate, or no communication occurs. And because the universe of facts itself has a structure, that structure is forced upon any language in some degree. Working from those premises, we use the machine as an intermediary; we give it an electrical analogue of the factual structure, and set it to compare the known language with the unknown in the light of that structure."

"And it works?" Qu'ulqu'un said.

"Pretty well. Of course part of the secret is setting up the appropriate analogue. One sees the universe differently from our planet than one would see it from, say, inside a dark nebula. But even there we can allow for a certain amount of latitude in the settings and still get results. After all, as soon as a race attains to scientific method, it also recognizes the cosmological principle—that in basic structure the universe looks everywhere the same, no matter where one stands. . . . There now, I think we're about ready."

"Just a minute," Qu'ulqu'un said. "Don't forget that these suicides didn't behave according to the laws we know. Isn't it possible that the same would hold true for their language? Supposing they used their writing to communicate —well, fiction, poetry, and so on, instead of facts?"

"They could hardly have been as aberrated as all that," the Curator said. "Anyhow, even organized lying affects its victims only when it *seems* like the truth—in other words, when its underlying structure conforms to the structure of the factual world, even as it distorts it. And how would a people who wrote down nothing but lies get any work done?"

He touched a mouth-part to a jewel on the face of the machine.

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For an instant there seemed to be no response to the odor-command. Then the translator emitted a few disconnected words, and, immediately afterward, a great blast of sound, seemingly coming from half a hundred voices at once. The noise was so loud that it was impossible to tell what the words were—only that they were spoken with the greatest urgency. Then it happened again, this time, it seemed, with different words—or were they different?

The Curator shot out a claw to adjust the volume, but before he had quite touched the knob, the machine became much quieter. Now the voices—it was obvious that there really were many of them—had begun to murmur the message over and over, each one minutely altering the text each time.

At this volume level, the Curator could pick out most of the individual words: 'Ruler' was in there somewhere, and so was 'entrance' and the phrase 'I summon' or 'it summons'—often both. In the welter of slight alterations of all these ideas, however, it was impossible to comprehend any single sentence, especially since their grammatical relationships to each other also appeared to be undergoing a process of constant reshuffling.

While the Curator listened in almost panicky amazement, the voices began to merge together again and soon the machine was shouting as loudly as before, and as unintelligibly. The frozen claw abruptly resumed its journey and the machine stopped.

"Ouch," Q u ' u l q u ' u n said. "Whatever else they were, they were noisy."

"I don't understand," the Curator said. "I must have made a mistake in the settings. . . . No, everything seems to be all right. And the machine was checked over just this morning."

"It sounds to me," Qu'ulqu'un proffered, "as though that gadget was reading a lot of things at once that should be read separately."

"It knows better than that," the Curator said. "Anyhow, all those voices were reading the same text, or variants of it. Well, the document is divided into three major sections, as I suppose you noticed; let's try the second section and see if it's any clearer."

He reset the device and turned it on. This time, indeed, the message was perfectly clear, though again it varied in delivery from that of a single voice declaiming against a background haze of mumbling, all the way to the already-familiar unison shouting. Again, too, there were minute, continual alterations in the text for no apparent reason. The text itself was: "In my sorrow I am strong" (varied at one point, for instance, to read: "In my strength I am sorrowful.")

This almost content-free notion was repeated, over and over again, in the most astonishing variety of ways, many of them seemingly highly inappropriate to the mes-

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sage. Toward the end of this section of the document, the machine astounded the Curator by uttering the message once in stilted Vegan —though the planet actually named was a place called 'Turkey,' where, it appeared, the writer of the document would have felt just as strong and just as sorrowful had he ever had a chance to visit it. The whole complex, unfathomable multi-speech ended with a soft utterance by perhaps a third of the speakers. It was given considerable emphasis, but all it actually *said* was: "This is the end."

"Madmen!" Qu'ulqu'un exclaimed. "I expected nothing more. This is organized lying with a vengeance. They found out how to persuade everybody to lie at once, and then they all got into the game and killed each other off without noticing what they were doing!"

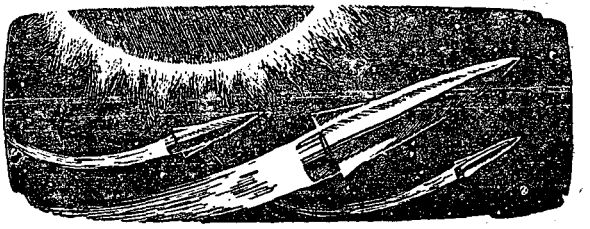
"Patience," the Curator said. "That can't be the way it was, Qu'ulqu'un. How could they have developed any science if they abandoned fact that completely?"

"All right," Qu'ulqu'un said gloomily, "*you* explain it. As for me, I think I was well advised to get off that planet the moment I was able to. I wish you luck, Curator."

He spread his wings and propelled himself out of the hall with three great blows against the air. The Curator reached again toward the machine, intending to try the last section of the document, and then drew back. He could give the device any of a multitude of instructions—it was exceedingly flexible—but he realized suddenly that he did not really know what he wanted to tell it. For the second time that day, his abdomen contracted in a heavy sigh, and the dome rang with the many-toned chord of the air rushing from his fur-fringed spiracles.

The Curator no more noticed the meshing of the vibrations into a composite sound than would any other member of his race. A sigh was a sigh; and besides, his people were tone-deaf. To the tone-deaf all music is a wild cacophony, a meaningless jumble of sound..

Inside the machine, the only surviving score of the Beethoven Symphony No. Five in C Minor awaited its last interpreter.



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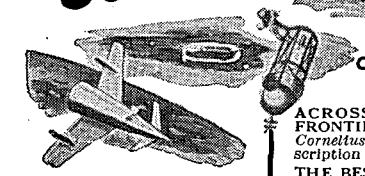

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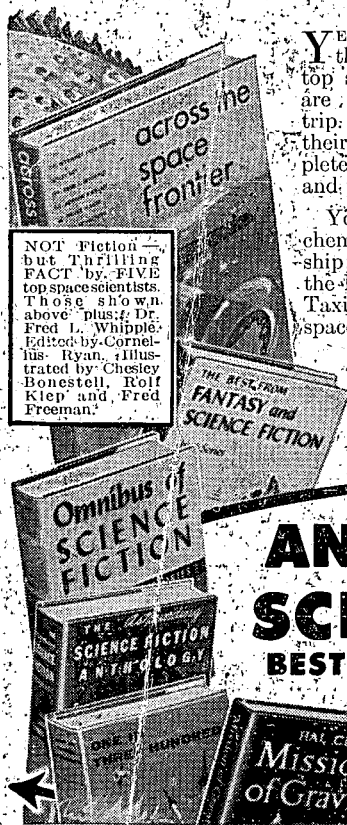
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